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RESHAPING NORMS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S CHALLENGES TO CULTURAL SCRIPTS ON EMPOWERMENT, MARRIAGE AND FEMININE AGENCY

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Abstract

The article "Reshaping Norms: A Qualitative Exploration of Women's Challenges to Cultural Scripts on Empowerment, Marriage, and Feminine Agency" investigates how women confront and redefine traditional cultural expectations related to empowerment, marriage, and their roles in society. Through in-depth interviews the study uncovers the strategies women employ to navigate and challenge these entrenched norms. The findings highlight the complex interplay between societal pressures and individual agency, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of gender roles and the pursuit of empowerment within various cultural contexts. Using semi-structured interviews with 8 women recruited from Islamabad, Wah Cantt, Hassanabdal, Haripur, Mianwali, Attock and Rawalpindi. For the present study qualitative approach was used. For this, participants (N=8) were selected through purposive sampling. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), codes, sub themes and major themes, were extracted from the transcripts. Six major themes were reported i.e. personal empowerment and agency, marriage and feminine agency, how families influence this, psychological challenges, struggles in society, navigating non normative societal norms, and how women deal with all of these. The result found that deep-rooted gender norms often limit women's freedom, decision-making, and

movement. Women entrepreneurs face additional hurdles, such as unfair treatment and societal expectations, affecting both their personal lives and businesses. Despite these obstacles, some people are beginning to question and move away from restrictive practices, with education and job opportunities playing key roles in this shift. However, women in leadership positions still encounter biases and subtle discrimination at work, highlighting ongoing challenges. Overall, the study emphasizes the complex relationship between societal expectations and personal choices, pointing to the need for significant changes to achieve gender equality and empower women in different cultural settings. Current study has implications for policy makers and provides a strong base for future studies.

Keywords: empowerment, societal struggle, marriage, feminine agency, cultural scripts, qualitative method, semi structured interviews.

Introduction

In societies with deeply ingrained cultural traditions, such as Pakistan, women have often been bound by predefined roles that tell them how to behave, what to wear, and how to measure their worth. These roles are heavily influenced by family expectations, religious beliefs, and long-standing social norms. For centuries, women in Pakistan were expected to prioritize marriage, motherhood, and family life above all else. However, a new wave of change is sweeping through the country, where a growing number of women are challenging these traditional roles, especially when it comes to concepts like empowerment, marriage, and feminine agency.

This article explores the ways in which Pakistani women are reshaping these cultural scripts and redefining what it means to be empowered, to be in control of one's life, and to negotiate the complex terrain between personal desires and societal expectations. It highlights the struggles and triumphs of women who are asserting their independence, breaking away from traditional norms, and taking charge of their futures.

The Limits of Cultural Expectations

In many societies, including Pakistan, cultural expectations create a framework within which women are expected to operate. These expectations dictate everything from the way women should dress to the roles they should fulfill in the family and society. In Pakistan, these roles have been historically centered around marriage and motherhood. Women have been taught to view themselves primarily through their relationships to others—mainly as wives and mothers.

These cultural scripts, while once deeply entrenched, have created significant barriers to women's self-empowerment. Women who step outside of these prescribed roles often face criticism, judgment, or even rejection. The societal belief that a woman's value is directly linked to her marital status or her ability to have children has prevented many from exploring their own aspirations outside of these parameters. As a result, many women in Pakistan have found it challenging to envision themselves as independent, ambitious individuals who can live life on their own terms.

Redefining Empowerment

The concept of empowerment is multifaceted. Traditionally, empowerment for women in Pakistan has been tied to fulfilling the cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood. However, in recent years, the meaning of empowerment has begun to shift. Empowerment, for many women today, is not about conforming to societal norms but about reclaiming control over their own lives, making choices that align with their personal aspirations, and asserting their voice in spaces where they were once silenced.

For many women, empowerment means having the freedom to pursue education, build careers, and make decisions without the constant pressure to conform to traditional norms. It means the ability to choose who they want to be, what they want to do, and how they want to live. In this sense, empowerment is no longer limited to fulfilling roles defined by others but is about women taking ownership of their narratives and deciding what makes them feel fulfilled and powerful.

Marriage

In Pakistan, marriage has long played a major role in the lives of women, and staying single is not only viewed as socially inappropriate but also as a rejection of the institution's cultural hegemony. In Pakistan, being single is seen as abnormal, especially for women, and marriage is expected of all citizens (Sultana et al., 2021). The current study put light on the experiences of single women living in Pakistan, a traditional country where women are typically only viewed as mothers and wives. This research endeavor aimed to examine the viewpoints of single.

Marriage has long been considered the pinnacle of a woman's life in Pakistan. It is seen not just as a personal commitment but as a social milestone, one that validates a woman's identity and worth. However, as women's aspirations evolve, so too does their view of marriage. More and more women are questioning whether marriage should be the defining factor of their existence, especially when it comes to their professional ambitions and personal growth.

Women who prioritize their careers, education, or travel over marriage are often viewed with skepticism. For many, the societal pressure to marry early can feel overwhelming, especially when it clashes with their other goals. However, younger generations of women are increasingly rejecting the idea that they need to be married to be successful or happy. These women are choosing to focus on building their own identities before committing to marriage, and in doing so, they are challenging the centuries-old notion that a woman's life is incomplete without a husband.

Marriage is no longer the primary measure of a woman's success, and unmarried women are increasingly carving out their own paths, confident in their value and their ability to achieve their personal and professional goals. In fact, for many, staying unmarried or choosing to delay marriage is a form of resistance to societal pressures, a declaration that their lives are not defined by traditional scripts.

Feminine Agency: Gaining Control over One's Life

Agency refers to a person's ability to make choices, assert their own will, and exercise control over their life. For women in Pakistan, agency has historically been limited by deeply ingrained cultural norms that dictate how they should behave, what roles they should play, and

what choices they are allowed to make. From a young age, many women are conditioned to believe that their worth lies in serving others, whether it be their families, husbands, or children.

But this idea of women as passive figures is being challenged. Women today are demanding the freedom to live life on their own terms. They are asserting their right to make decisions about their careers, their relationships, and their bodies. Instead of accepting passive roles within the family and society, these women are actively shaping their futures.

This reclaiming of agency is especially evident in the workplace, where women are entering professions that were once considered off-limits, excelling in fields like medicine, engineering, business, and law. They are also pushing back against social pressures to conform to traditional norms of femininity, choosing to express themselves authentically rather than following prescribed standards of beauty, behavior, or modesty. By asserting their independence and making choices for themselves, these women are redefining what it means to be a woman in today's world.

The Challenges Women Face

While many women are successfully breaking free from traditional norms, the road to empowerment is still fraught with challenges. Women who choose to live outside societal expectations often face harsh judgment and criticism. They may be labeled as “rebellious,” “selfish,” or “unfeminine” by those who uphold traditional cultural values. In some cases, women who delay marriage or choose not to marry at all may even be ostracized by their families or communities.

Beyond social judgment, women also face structural barriers that make it more difficult to achieve true empowerment. These barriers include limited access to education, unequal pay in the workplace, discriminatory laws, and the lack of legal protection against harassment or violence. Even in urban areas where women are making strides in education and the workforce, these systemic obstacles persist, making it harder for women to break free from the constraints of traditional roles.

The Role of Education and Employment in Empowerment

Education and employment have emerged as critical tools in the fight for women's empowerment in Pakistan. Education provides women with the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to navigate the world and challenge the cultural scripts that have historically limited their options. By pursuing higher education, women are breaking the cycle of limited opportunity and are positioning themselves to be leaders, entrepreneurs, and professionals.

Work, too, has become a space where women can assert their agency. More women are entering the workforce, whether in traditional sectors or in fields that were once dominated by men. Through their work, they not only gain financial independence but also challenge the notion that a woman's place is in the home. Women who succeed in their careers serve as role models for others, proving that it is possible to balance personal ambitions with family life and societal expectations.

This study explores how women in Pakistan are challenging traditional cultural expectations about empowerment, marriage, and feminine agency. For years, women have been expected to prioritize marriage and motherhood, but more are now rethinking these roles. They are defining empowerment not by fitting into societal norms but by gaining control over their lives, whether through education, careers, or personal choices. As women push back against the pressure to marry and fulfill traditional roles, they are reshaping what it means to be a woman in Pakistan. This research aims to understand these changing dynamics, the challenges women face, and how these shifts are paving the way for a more equitable future.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses several key ideas to understand how women in Pakistan challenge traditional expectations about empowerment, marriage, and their role in society. These ideas come from different theories that focus on gender, culture, and change.

Feminist Theory: Agency and Empowerment

Feminist theory helps us understand the lives of single Pakistani women by focusing on how power, gender roles, and societal expectations impact their choices. It supports women's right to make their own decisions, including whether or not to marry, and highlights the importance of living freely without giving in to social pressures.

This theory challenges traditional ideas of marriage, showing how such expectations can limit women, especially in patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Instead, it promotes women's empowerment, which means having control, confidence, and the ability to shape their own lives. It also encourages women to support each other and work together to break free from oppressive systems.

Feminist theory highlights the importance of financial independence and professional growth, showing that many women prioritize their careers and economic freedom over the restrictions of society. This supports the idea that women are self-sufficient, ambitious, and want to live life on their own terms.

Feminist theory helps us understand how women gain control over their lives. In traditional societies, empowerment for women was often linked to marriage and family roles. However, feminist thinkers argue that empowerment should be about women making their own choices in all aspects of life—education, career, and personal goals. Agency means having the power to make decisions for yourself. In this study, it focuses on how women in Pakistan are challenging the norm that marriage should be their main goal, and instead, they are seeking independence through education and work.

Cultural Theory: How Society Shapes Women's Roles

Cultural theory explains how the traditions, beliefs, and values of society create "cultural scripts" that define what is expected from women. These cultural scripts often define women's roles in marriage and the family, limiting their freedom and opportunities. The idea of habitus (from Bourdieu) tells us that these cultural norms are deeply ingrained in people's behavior, so women might not even question them until they begin to experience change. The framework helps us see how women are beginning to challenge these norms and redefine what it means to be empowered, particularly when it comes to marriage and independence.

Social Constructivism

Social constructionism explains that our understanding of the world, including ideas like marriage and empowerment, is shaped by society, culture, and our environment. It shows that concepts such as gender roles, responsibilities, and expectations in marriage are not natural or fixed but are created through social interactions with family, friends, media, and the community.

This theory highlights that society plays a big role in defining what marriage means and how women are expected to behave within it. For single Pakistani women, these societal ideas about marriage and empowerment influence their choices. Instead of following traditional roles, many choose alternative paths to achieve empowerment, such as focusing on their careers and independence.

Giddens' Structuration Theory

The basis of the theory of Structuration involves the identification of the relationship between the individuals and the social forces that act upon us. In Giddens' theory of Structuration he tries to balance the role that actors play with their limited choice of position in history and in the social fabric they find themselves. In his theory, Giddens proposes that people do not have entire preference of their actions and their knowledge is restricted; nonetheless, they are the elements that recreate the social structure and produces social change (Craib, 1992).

Giddens' theory of structuration explains that while society has rules and norms that influence how people act, individuals also have the power to change those rules. In the case of Pakistani women, even though they face pressure to conform to traditional roles, they are not passive. They are actively pushing against these norms and, through their actions, changing how society views their roles and capabilities. For example, single women might face pressure to get married, but when they choose to focus on their independence and careers, they show they are not just following society's rules. Instead, they are reshaping these expectations. This theory shows that people are not powerless they can act to create change while still being influenced by society.

Research Questions

1. What are the key challenges women face in resisting traditional societal expectations regarding marriage and their roles within the family?
2. How do women's personal experiences with marriage, both within and outside of the traditional norms, contribute to reshaping the cultural scripts around empowerment and feminine agency?

Method

Research Objectives

Exploring how women understand empowerment when challenging traditional ideas about marriage and family, and the challenges they face in balancing societal pressures to marry with personal goals for education, work, and independence.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used in which semi structured interviews were taken. Due to interviewing techniques, reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate the findings. Reflexive thematic analysis is the method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes, in this case, within the reviewed studies (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Here are 6 steps of reflexive thematic analysis;

- Familiarizing with datasets,
- generating initial codes,
- making categories,
- searching and reviewing themes,
- defining and naming themes,
- and producing the report theoretically (Clark et al., 2019).

Participants

A reflexive thematic analysis was used among 8 women. The study is purely based on the qualitative method.

Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

In current study sample was 8 women. Women above 18 and empowered women will be included as well as data will be taken from educated women.

Exclusion Criteria

In this study the participants below age 18 and uneducated women will not be included.

Procedure

1. **Informed Consent.** Informed consent was obtained from empowered women before initiating interviews, ensuring their willingness to participate.
2. **Confidentiality.** Women were briefed on the confidentiality of their provided information, and the research aim and purpose were explained.
3. **Interview Details.** Prior to interviews, participants were informed about the estimated duration (35 to 45 minutes) and the recording of the session.
4. **Interview Format.** Semi structured interviews with open ended questions were conducted, and the sessions were transcribed for analysis.
5. **Gratitude.** The researcher expressed gratitude to participants after the completion of each interview.

Ethical Considerations

To conduct this research, the researchers took ethical approval from the Psychology department of RIPHAH International University, from participants, before conducting the research. While dealing with the participants, as well as authorities, ethical measures would be kept under consideration. Before starting the research, the participants would be briefed about the purpose, process and the implications of this study. An informed consent was given to the participants that ensured that personal information of participants would not be disclosed to anyone except the researchers. Permission to record interviews was given to participants during the research process. They were guaranteed the right to leave the study whenever they wanted. Furthermore, prior to starting the research, the institutional review boards required approvals for ethical considerations were secured.

Data Gathering Tools

For qualitative research, a semi-structured in-depth interview guideline was formulated with open-ended questions allowing participants to share their experiences covering the all domains of life. Depending on the responses of the participants, probing questions were also asked.

Demographic Information Sheet

Table 1

Demographic details of participants (N=8)

Participant	Age	Profession	Family system	Socio economic class	Geographical Location
1	33	Teacher	Joint	Middle class	Wah cantt
2	32	Lecturer	Nuclear	Upper middle class	Mianwali
3	30	Lecturer	Joint	Middle class	Hassan abdal
4	36	POF employee	Joint	Middle class	Haripur
5	33	Banker	Nuclear	Upper middle class	Rawalpindi
6	28	Coordinator	Joint	Upper Middle class	Islamabad
7	31	Doctor	Nuclear	Upper class	Attock
8	35	Doctor	Nuclear	Upper class	Islamabad

Results

The interviews have provided significant details of themes, sub-themes, and codes. The result found that deep-rooted gender norms often limit women's freedom, decision-making, and movement. Women entrepreneurs face additional hurdles, such as unfair treatment and societal expectations, affecting both their personal lives and businesses. Despite these obstacles, some people are beginning to question and move away from restrictive practices, with education and job opportunities playing key roles in this shift. However, women in leadership positions still encounter biases and subtle discrimination at work, highlighting ongoing challenges. Overall, the study emphasizes the complex relationship between societal expectations and personal choices, pointing to the need for significant changes to achieve gender equality and empower women in different cultural settings.

Table 2

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (N=8)

Major Themes	Sub Themes	Relevant Codes
Personal Empowerment and Agency	Personal Freedom	Autonomy and right awareness Unwillingness to compromise Emphasis on freedom preservation Freedom in decision making
	Professional Opportunities	Access to education Career advancement challenges Pursuing career goals Prioritizing personal and professional development Desire for independence
	Educational and Negotiating Autonomy	Seeking shared values Strategies to assert independence Balancing personal desires with familial obligations Prioritizing financial compatibility Importance of open communication Embracing self-reliance
Marriage and Feminine Agency	Redefining Marital Roles	Limited proposal options Socio-Economic rejection Relying on spiritual guidance Shared responsibilities in marriage Challenging traditional marital expectations
	Societal Perceptions of Empowered Women	Overcoming financial hardships Impact of past failed relationships Stigma associated with female empowerment Reactions to women challenging cultural scripts
Familial Expectations and Honors	Balancing Personal Desires with Familial Obligations	Familial expectations conflicts arising from family opinions Interpersonal conflicts role expectations and clashes

Psychological Issues	Mental Health Struggles	Coping with traumatic experience Stigma associated with being single Dealing with body image pressure Experiences of social isolation Encounters with differential treatment
Navigating Non-Normative Roles	Societal Perceptions and Stigmatization	Labeling as norm violators Societal judgment and moral scrutiny Economic constraints affecting housing
	Cultural and Social Pressure	Navigating religious beliefs Societal attitudes
	Gender Inequality and Domestic Responsibilities	Inherited biases Persistence of traditional domestic expectations Imbalance in household chore distribution Strain from dual work burdens Women's dependence on men Early and enforced marriages Expectation to compromise Caste and gender-based discrimination
	Traditional Beliefs	Stigma associated with Gender Norm Violations Early marriages as a religious obligations Objectifications of women
Coping Mechanism and Normalization Strategies	fixed social hierarchy	Limited freedom in partner choice Strict adherence to societal norms Negative opinions and uncooperativeness
	Exercising discretion in public	Embracing solitude for personal growth Taking a stand and rejecting proposals Cultivating emotional strength Maintaining positive self-image Building self-confidence Appreciation of singlehood benefits Valuing independence
	Relocating to more accepting environments	Embracing vulnerability to seek help Accessing professional guidance and forming strong bonds
	Resistance	Defying societal norms Standing up against injustice Asserting the right to make independent decisions

Table2: Shows major themes with sub-themes and relevant codes

1. Personal Empowerment And Agency

Figure 6

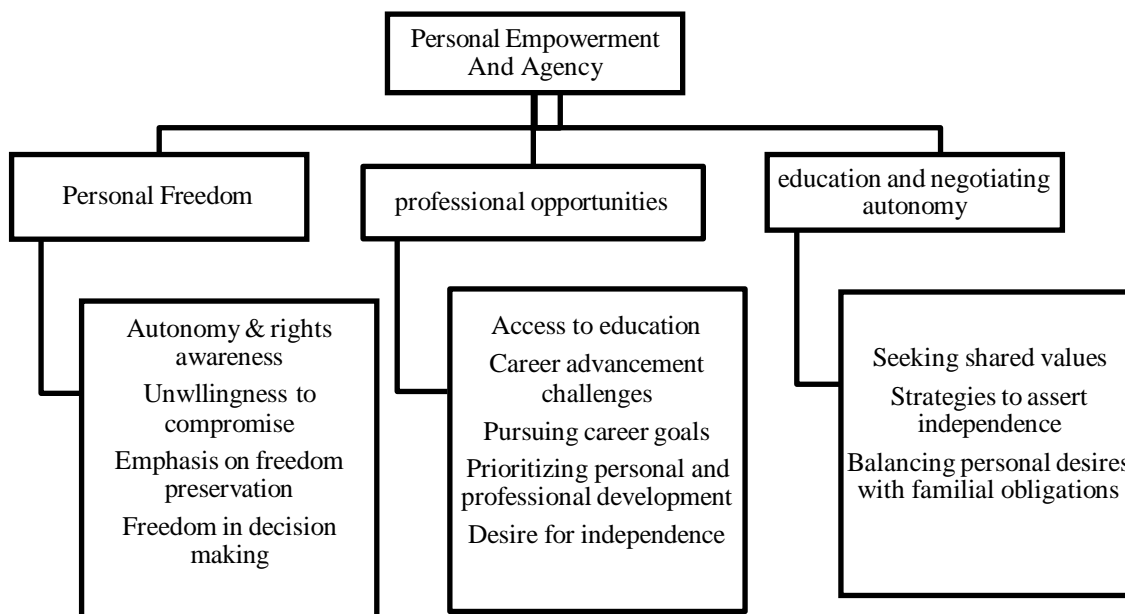


Figure 6: Showing major theme of Personal Empowerment and Agency with sub-themes and codes

Personal Freedom

The sub-theme of personal freedom within the broader theme of personal empowerment highlights unwavering dedication of participant to individual rights and disapproval to compromise. This sub-theme reflects deep sense of autonomy that is being consciously aware of one's rights and placing significant value in maintaining independence. The unwillingness to compromise highlights a steadfast commitment to preserving their freedom, whether it is in lifestyle choices, decision-making autonomy, or the pursuit of personal aspirations. The narratives of participant as discussed below show a resolute belief in the importance of maintaining autonomy as a foundation for personal growth.

“It is important to know our rights. This society has different expectations from us, so it's all about standing up for our freedom”.

Professional opportunities

This theme displays how women have been achieving their goals while pursuing their jobs. The record of participants shows that single women are adopting a proactive and intentional approach in their professional lives. Their emphasis on work highlights the significance of both personal and professional development. It also reveals a strong desire for autonomy. Their ambition to prioritize work and personal development is strongly highlighted. This defies conventional approach and emphasizes independence.

Education and negotiating autonomy

The sub-theme of modifying preferences signifies the thoughtful considerations of the participants in finding partners with similar values, educational and financial compatibility. It summarizes a strategic approach to marriage. It emphasizes the intentional evolution of personal preferences. women are agents of their own empowerment. They actively engage in redefining the criteria for a life partner. Effective and open communication was not highlighted enough as a pivotal approach in growing relationships.

2. Marriage and Feminine Agency

Figure 7

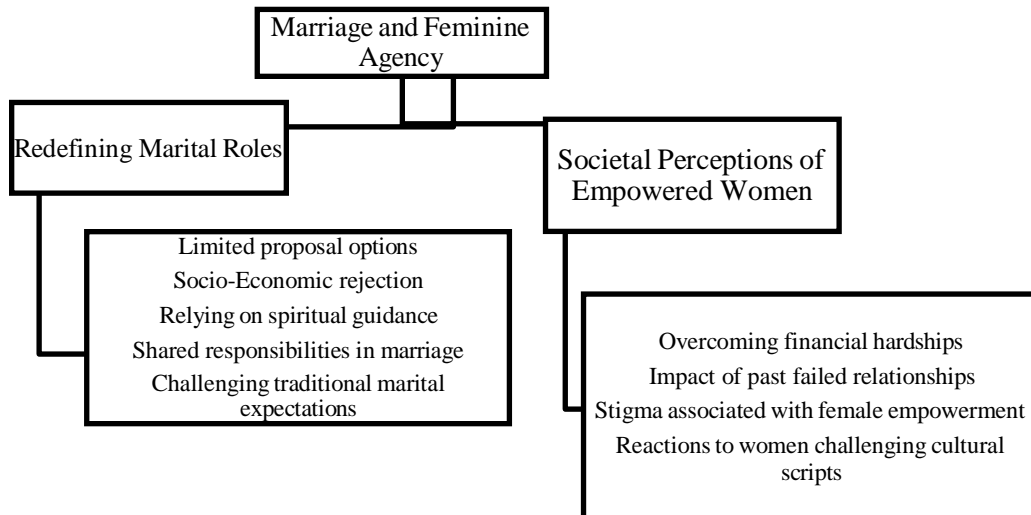


Figure 7: Showing major theme of Marriage and Feminine Agency with sub-themes and codes

Redefining Marital Roles

It shows how hard it is for the individuals to find matches. It can be anything from not having many proposal choices to having to deal with socioeconomic rejections. Societies and cultures rules and standards can make it hard for women to find good matches. The social and economic challenges they face show how complicated the link is between money and marriage suitability. In addition, some people also depend spiritual approach to handle their problems. These reasons, however, are mostly used to turn down a proposal.

It is sad when economic factors become a barrier. It undermines the other good qualities. Proposals fitting the criteria of both the family members and the person involved are scarce.

Societal Perceptions of Empowered Women

It describes the different challenges that women faced on their journey of empowerment. One of the obstacles they usually face is the financial difficulties. By overcoming them, they proved their strength and adaptability to pave through whatever troubles are in their path. This also signifies the strength and adaptability of these individuals showing their ability to navigate economic challenges.

3. Familial Expectations and Honours Figure 8

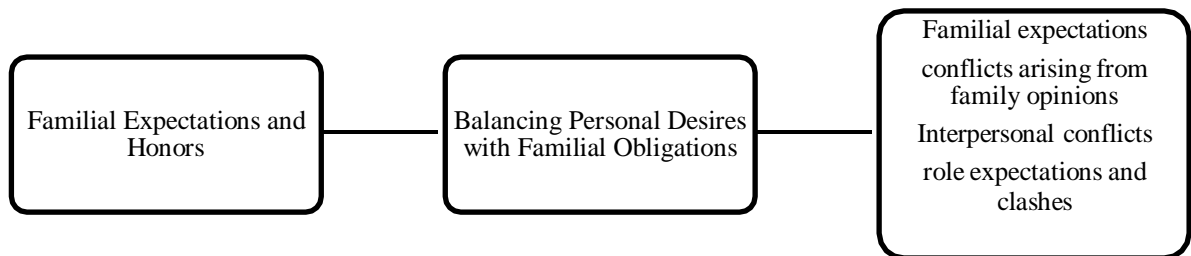


Figure 8: Showing major theme of Familial Expectations and Honours with sub-themes and codes

Balancing Personal Desires with Familial Obligations

There are various complicated expectations and demands imposed on women. They usually come from family opinions, conflicts between the members of the family regarding difference of opinion and pressure. The narrative unfolds as single women deal with all these problems on their own without any help.

Conflicts may develop due to differences in respect perspective between the woman and her family. The clash between traditional expectations and the individual's desire for autonomy and personal satisfaction is often times the main culprit. Also, the respective role a woman is supposed to play according to the society imposes a heavy burden on the women.

This study explores how predetermined roles for women within the family influence her through her life. Cultural clashes further aggravate this dynamic. As traditional values and modern aspirations intersect, it creates a space where the woman must negotiate her identity within the familial context. A woman is supposed to deal with the traditional values, and modern perspective all on her own while trying to determine her own self in life. While exploring this topic, these different factors are considered to evaluate the balance a woman is supposed to maintain to keep the peace and realize her own empowerment.

4. Psychological Issues

It includes not only physical but also emotional and social challenges they face.

Figure 9

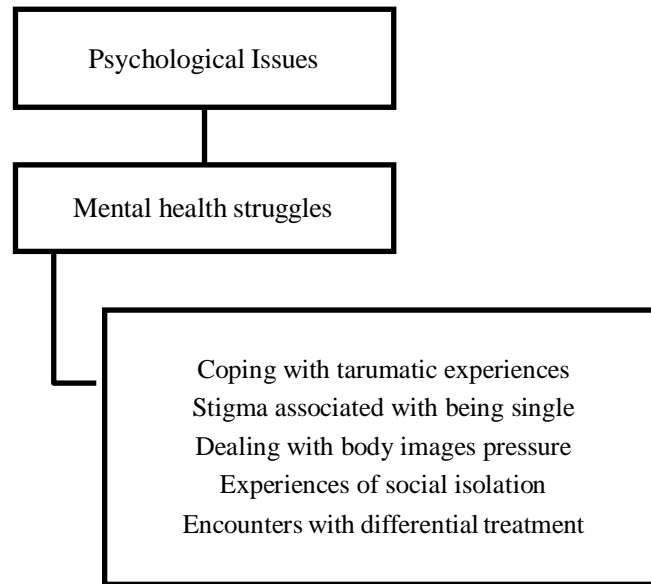


Figure 9: Showing major theme of Psychological Issues with sub-themes and codes

Mental Health Struggles

This sub-theme encompasses the psychological toll of coping with traumatic experiences related to matchmaking processes. It involves the emotional challenges and resilience needed in dealing with the expectations of the society. The stigma attached to seeking mental health support highlights the difficulties the women face while undergoing the treatment. As such, body shaming has become prevalent in the society. It only adds to the emotional damage the women are already facing in regard to their marriage. These various elements are out through the study to examine how they affect the psychological wellbeing of the women

5. Navigating Non-Normative Roles

Seeing how social factors are connected to marriage and empowerment perspective can help us understand the different complications that women face. Furthermore it sheds light on gender inequality, traditional beliefs, and norms of the society that hinder any women seeking to empower herself. It describes the events that characterize their attitude towards marriage. It provides a detailed understanding of the various elements of society at play.

Figure 10

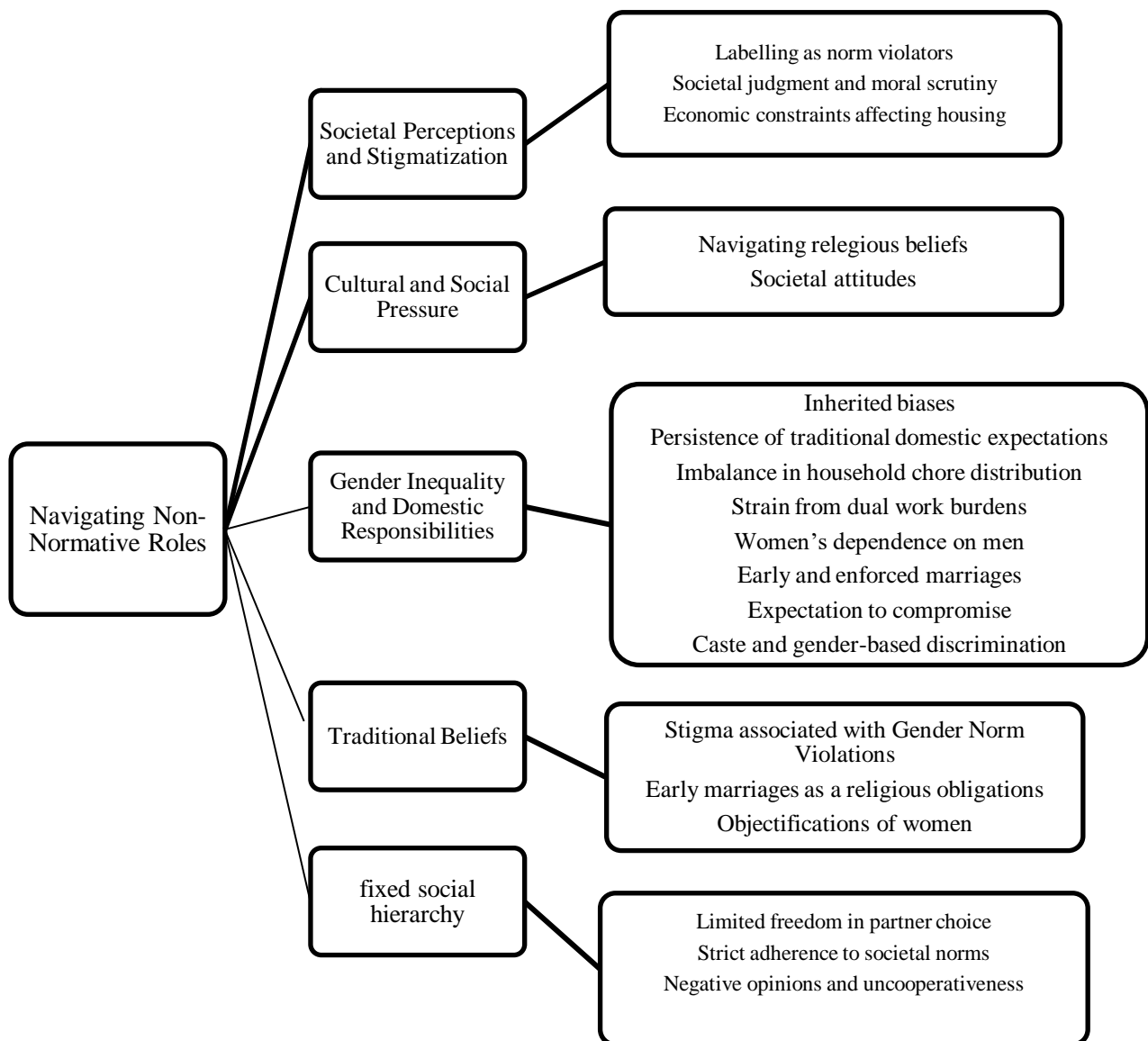


Figure 10: Showing major theme of Navigating Non-Normative Roles with sub-themes and codes.

Societal Perceptions and Stigmatization

Social struggles and loneliness involve the scrutiny of the society that results in isolation and economic problems resulting from being deprived of help. Woman usually finds themselves in this state of isolation and absence of meaningful relationships like friends. The critics of the society that judge every single thing they come across only tends to aggravate this situation. These constrain not only fail to help the person in need but also add to their mental stress. Financial problems, on top of these conditions, can also affect ability to secure a better housing. This interplay of a judgemental society with a poor financial situation is what a women faces while working to find their way.

Cultural and Social pressure

This major theme explores the scenarios where women have to deal with the religious beliefs and social pressures. This analysis inquires the impact of culture, religion, and prevailing values in a society on the experiences of women. It examines how religious beliefs shape perceptions of marriage and that it is often affected by the traditional values. At the same time, attitude of the society, involving stereotypes and judgments, confer to the complex challenges faced by women. This study uncovers the varied nature of cultural and social pressures. It sheds light on the subtle interactions between individual choices, societal expectations, and religious interpretations within the context of marriage and empowerment.

Gender Inequality and Domestic Responsibilities

The term "Gender Inequality," explores the deep rooted problem of discrimination against women in Pakistan. Women are usually considered to be dependent on men for their day to day lives. This dependency usually stems from inhibiting the women from opportunities similar to men. This unequal power struggle is only aggravated through early and forced marriages. The expectations imposed on women involve compromising on their limited opportunities and living within the traditional circle. The discrimination extends to caste and gender-based biases. It subjects the women to societal commentary that strengthens harmful stereotypes and prohibits their individual development. The exploration of the challenges stemming from deeply ingrained gender inequalities greatly highlights an important aspect of their lives.

Traditional Beliefs

Stigmatization of singlehood because of societal biases, leads to an unwarranted judgments on individuals who choose not to marry. This stigma can contribute to feelings of alienation and a sense of not adhering to traditional norms. Also the idea of early marriage as a religious obligation places a huge pressure on women to accept the cultural expectations. This religious perspective often shapes societal attitudes, affecting the notion that marriage at an early age is not just a cultural norm but a religious mandate. This places a heavier burden on women

who may prioritize personal and professional development over early marriage.

Moreover, the comprehension of women within the context of traditional beliefs deepens the societal tendency to view women primarily as an existence for leisure pursuits. It diminishes the autonomy of women, enhancing the stereotypical roles and limiting their choices. Therefore, the sub-theme aided to shed light on the deeply ingrained traditional beliefs.

Fixed social hierarchy

This sub-theme describes the rigid structures of society, where the freedom of choosing a life partner is constrained and adherence to societal norms is expected. The limited freedom in this regard reflects the societal constraints that dictate that is considered an acceptable match. Women have to go through these predefined parameters, often dictated by cultural expectations, familial traditions, or societal norms. The strict adherence to societal norms further aggravates these challenges, placing individuals within a fixed framework that presided over their behaviour, especially in the context of marriage. These typical standards might encircle the traditional roles, cultural expectations, and established pathways for women, limiting their autonomy in decision-making.

6. Coping Mechanism and Normalization Strategies

Figure 11

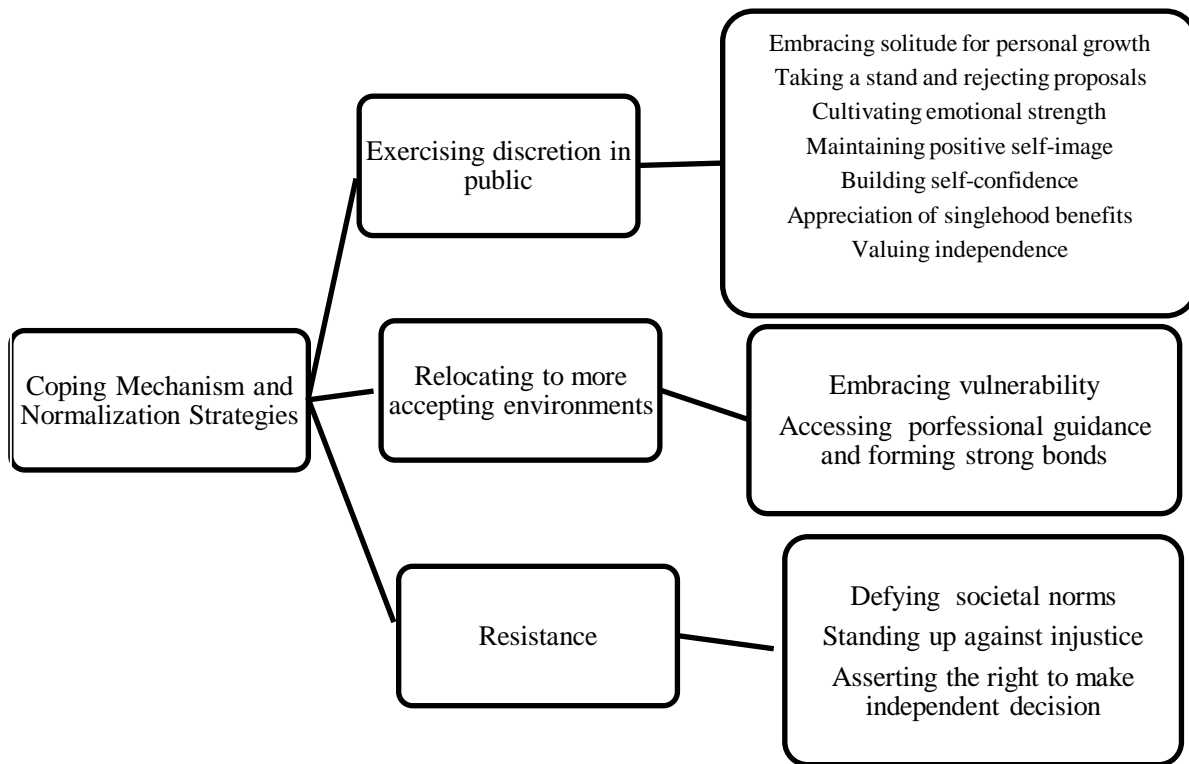


Figure 11: Showing major theme of Coping Mechanisms and Normalization Strategies with sub-themes and codes

Exercising discretion in public

It describes the solitude as a means for personal growth and complete independence from others. It involves standing against the society and making a conscious decision of rejecting the proposals that they don't deem fit. Furthermore, self-reliance deals with emotional strength and encourages a positive self-image. It helps to build confidence regardless of the relationship status. It leads to active approach to personal development through resilience and independence while maintaining a strong sense of self.

Relocating to more accepting environments

It highlights the acceptance of vulnerability and to seek help from various sources. This state of weakness is not seen as a means to gain strength. It signifies the effort to accept help from others for personal growth. Seeking professional help is a very important aspect in regard. To help with their psychological and personal wellbeing, women look for professional advice or therapy. This shows a proper approach to empower themselves and accept the importance of external expertise. Furthermore, making new connections is important in the process of seeking support. The bonds can extend just connections and can become a means of forming new friendships that provide strength and solidarity. They give an emotional outlet and help in shared growth. They can help establish a supportive environment. It also helps in facing the challenges related to being single. Therefore, seeking support is active and resilient stance. They can turn the vulnerabilities into personal development

Resistance

Stands for defiance and empowerment. This theme is characterized by a firm stance against norms of the society and the ensuing injustice. It enforces the right to make independent decisions. Women in their resistance, challenge existing the traditional values, social norms and beliefs. They refuse bend to the idea of established roles held by the society. By going against these norms, nurture their spirit of individuality and autonomy. They use their rights to uphold justice and equality for themselves and live their desired lives. This struggle advocated their rights for freedom, fair treatment and recognition. Being resilient in the face of powerful force reinforced their sense of autonomy. This extends to personal choices as well.

Women in the study described empowerment as having control over their own lives, making independent choices, and being financially and emotionally secure. While some saw marriage as a source of strength, others felt it limited their freedom, requiring them to prioritize family responsibilities over personal goals. Many women faced societal and familial pressures to conform to traditional roles, which often led to stress and anxiety, particularly for those choosing non-traditional paths such as remaining single or pursuing male-dominated careers. Despite criticism and judgment, these women found empowerment through education, financial independence, and supportive communities. Some used subtle strategies to gain acceptance for their choices, gradually shifting societal attitudes while maintaining family harmony. Overall, the study highlights how women continually negotiate their identities, challenge norms, and seek a balance between personal aspirations and social expectations, emphasizing the importance of broader acceptance and support for diverse paths to empowerment.

Table 3

Content Validity Ratio Analysis of Emergent Themes (N=8)

Themes	A	N	CVR
Personal Empowerment and Agency	3	3	1
Marriage and Feminine Agency	3	3	1
Familial Expectations and Honours	3	3	1
Psychological Issues	3	3	1
Navigating Non-Normative Roles	2	3	0.3
Coping Mechanism and Normalization Strategies	3	3	1

Note: A=Expert agreeing on essentials, N=Total number of experts, CVR= Content Validity Ratio

This table presents a CVR (Content Validity Ratio) analysis for various themes based on the level of agreement among experts. Themes 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 demonstrate a perfect CVR of 1.00, indicating unanimous agreement among all three experts regarding these themes.

Theme 5 shows a CVR of 0.33, suggesting a lower level of agreement among the experts, with only two out of three agreeing on this theme.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the complex and dynamic ways in which women navigate empowerment, marriage, societal expectations, and mental well-being. Personal empowerment and agency are crucial in shaping women's lives, as participants highlighted the significance of financial independence and emotional resilience in challenging societal norms. These findings align with previous studies, such as Kabeer's (1999) framework on empowerment, which emphasizes the importance of access to resources, agency, and achievements in shaping women's autonomy. Similarly, studies by Cornwall (2016) and Narayan (2005) highlight how empowerment is not just about external resources but also about self-perception and confidence, both of which were evident in participants' narratives.

Marriage, traditionally viewed as a milestone of security and fulfilment, was seen by some as a constraint that limited autonomy. However, many women negotiated their roles within marriage to assert agency, challenging rigid gender roles in subtle but impactful ways. These findings are consistent with studies by Giddens (1992) on reflexive modernity, which suggests that individuals increasingly negotiate traditional roles in response to changing societal norms. Research by Kandiyoti (1988) on bargaining with patriarchy further supports this, indicating that women adopt various strategies to redefine marriage and household roles.

Familial expectations and the notion of honour played a significant role in shaping women's choices. Many faced pressures to conform, leading to stress and internal conflicts. This

aligns with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, where social structures influence individual behaviors and choices, making it difficult to challenge ingrained cultural norms. Studies on honor and gender by Abu-Lughod (1998) also highlight how familial pressures impact women's autonomy, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

Psychological challenges emerged as a common theme, as women struggled with anxiety and self-doubt when defying norms. The study underscores the importance of mental health support systems and the need for communities that validate women's choices. Previous research by Gilligan (1982) emphasizes how women's psychological well-being is deeply connected to societal expectations, while studies by Butler (2004) explore how deviation from gender norms can lead to emotional distress due to social policing of behaviour.

Coping mechanisms and normalization strategies were instrumental in allowing women to function within societal structures while asserting agency. Many leveraged education and career success as tools for negotiating autonomy, while others employed subtle forms of resistance to challenge gender norms. Scott's (1985) work on everyday resistance provides a useful lens to understand these strategies, suggesting that even small acts of defiance contribute to broader social change over time. This adaptability suggests that change is occurring, albeit gradually, and highlights the importance of fostering environments where women can make empowered choices without fear of judgment.

Conclusion

This study shows how women constantly work to balance personal goals, marriage, family expectations, and mental well-being. They challenge traditional norms in different ways some openly and some subtly. While obstacles remain, it is important to recognize diverse experiences and encourage support systems that help women make choices that suit them. Greater acceptance of different paths in life will contribute to a more empowering society for women everywhere. The empowerment is not a singular or universal experience but a deeply personal and evolving process. Women continuously redefine and challenge cultural scripts, demonstrating resilience and agency in various forms. Moving forward, there is a need for inclusive and flexible approaches to empowerment that accommodate diverse experiences and aspirations, ensuring that women are supported in pursuing the paths that best align with their values and ambitions.

Limitations

Current study had its limitations which are as follows

1. As the study was qualitative, so the sample size was small this limits the generalizability of results to broader population of Pakistan.
2. The use of participants (purposive sampling) to collect data from participants has induced selection biases.
3. Additionally, the use of sampling method has not fully captured the experiences of women belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds.

Implications

1. The narratives of women highlight the shift in cultural perceptions regarding the role of

women along with marriage and empowerment.

2. The study highlights the need for social support system for women that offer mental health and financial independence.
3. Current study has paved the path for future studies to be conducted on experiences of women residing in different regions. Along with studying how empowerment is perceived in women belonging to different socio-economic status.
4. Future researchers who wish to work on the same topic can gain inspiration from the current study.

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