

UNDERSTANDING THE NARRATIVES OF MARRIAGE AND EMPOWERMENT AMONG SINGLE PAKISTANI WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Marriage has consistently held a major position in the lives of women in Pakistan. Remaining unmarried is not only socially unacceptable but also seen as a violation of the cultural dominance of the institution of marriage (Sultana et al., 2021). Current study delves into how societal expectations regarding marriage influence the perceptions of empowerment in single women. Using semi-structured interviews with 5 single women recruited from Islamabad, Wah Cantt, Hassanabdal, Haripur, Mianwali and Rawalpindi. For the present study qualitative approach was used. For this, participants (N=5) 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 sub themes were reported i.e. personal empowerment, the difficulties in getting married, how families influence this, psychological challenges, struggles in society, societal norms, and how women deal with all of these. The results reported that traditional cultural norms exert a lot of pressure on women to get married, often thinking that being married means being accepted by others and being happy with your own life (Sultana et al., 2021). It further reported that empowering single women in Pakistan is a multifaceted process that often involves navigating cultural norms. Current study has implications for policy makers and provides a strong base for future studies.

Keywords: Singlehood, relationships, empowerment, societal struggle, traditional beliefs, marriage, qualitative method, semi structured interviews.

INTRODUCTION

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, Zeeshan, & Ahmed, 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 women, putting a greater emphasis on the problems and obstacles they encounter.

The majority of single women enjoy their freedom to think and work as well as their ability to support themselves financially. A lot of women think that marriage is not beneficial for women and is not

necessary. Without getting married, single women are capable of taking care of themselves. All single women feel that being single gives them more flexibility and independence in their lives in terms of living, working, finances, and personal time which leads to value and happiness, and that marriage is bad because it burdens women (Nimisha, 2016).

Ahmad et al. (2016) discovered that married women in Pakistan have greater mobility and involvement in household decision-making. In qualitative interviews, married women reported that they feel relatively more powerful now that they are married because they have better control over household finances due to family savings and involvement in decisions about how much to spend on clothing, health care, and movable furniture. Additionally, they revealed that their ownership of fixed property—that is, their house and land—has not improved and that they play a small enough part in the choices about whether to buy such property and what financial services to use. A married woman stated that, "After having my children, I feel more secure in both the household and society, and my participation in household decision-making has also improved" (Researchers' translation from Urdu).

Akram (2018) also found a positive correlation between the number of sons and women's empowerment overall and their involvement in household decision-making. However, single women in Pakistani society face more obstacles, particularly when it comes to their ability to participate in household decision-making (Asian Development Bank, 2010).

A study conducted by the website single-womantoday.com explored the reasons why some women remain single. The findings revealed that a significant factor contributing to women's single status is their strong focus on career advancement. For instance, Arham, a 38-year-old IT manager, expressed, "I haven't disregarded relationships, but my career takes precedence over love. If marriage doesn't happen, I'm fine with it." This underscores the contemporary trend where women prioritize achieving the next career milestone, attaining financial stability, and reaping the rewards of their education and hard work. Marriage, in contrast, often ranks lower on their list of priorities (Saleem & Durrani, 2022).

The aim of this study is to investigate and evaluate the experiences of marriage and empowerment among unmarried Pakistani women. The primary emphasis will be on examining the psychological effects and their influence on an individual's well-being, with a brief presentation of the associated financial effects. This chapter will elucidate the justification for selecting this research topic and offer a glimpse into the subsequent chapters by providing a concise overview of their content.

Literature Review

Marriage holds significant importance as an institution in Pakistani culture, with societal expectations for adults, both women and men, to marry at a certain age. In Pakistani society, it is deemed unacceptable for women to stay single and live independently. There is a cultural emphasis on women having the support of a man, whether it be a father, brother, husband, or son. Historically, women were not encouraged to prioritize their careers over marriage (Hussain, 2018).

However, a noticeable shift has occurred recently, challenging this traditional notion. Many women in Pakistan are now postponing or completely rejecting the idea of marriage. Empirical studies indicate that women with independent careers and from educated, stable backgrounds tend to exhibit more reluctance towards marriage. Despite this trend, the specific reasons behind women's decisions to remain single are yet to be thoroughly explored from their perspective. This study sought to identify the underlying reasons that lead Pakistani women to choose a single and unmarried life, avoiding the traditional marital bond (Rafiq, Saleem, Durrani, & Siddique, 2022).

The reasons that women quote for their singlehood also differ in terms of the societies they live in. Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) reported that for western women, incompatibility between career and marriage, failure in past relationships or being unable to find the right match, and the perception that marriage would curtail their freedom are offered as the main reasons for being single. Whereas, for Indian women additional factors associated with collectivist societies such as parental objection, financial constraints and loss of parents are also reported (Prabhakar, 2011).

Another related factor that has been found to have influenced never married women's marital decisions in ways that lead to singlehood is family background. Prominent among the family background factors is marriage of significant others such as parents, guardians and other close relatives, birth order, domestic violence, divorce and separation. Conflictual and unhappy parents' marriage is found to have negative effect on daughter's desire and opportunity to marry in ways that prolong marital delay and lead to permanent voluntary or involuntary singlehood (Ferguson, 2000; Siegel, 1995; WaKaranja, 1987). Growing up in a mother-only family is linked to remaining single. A research found that females reared in a one parent family, whether it is the father or mother, tend to remain single probably due to greater family responsibilities and recognition of the advantages of singlehood (Forsyth and Johnson, 1996).

Theoretical Framework

In my exploration of how women experience singlism and the factors influencing their experience, I used feminist theory, social constructivism theory and Giddens' Structuration theory to support my study.

Feminist Theory

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 single Pakistani women prioritize their careers and economic freedom over the restrictions of marriage. This supports the idea that single women are self-sufficient, ambitious, and want to live life on their own terms.

Social Constructivism

Theoretical examination of singlism can be approached through the lens of social constructionism. Social constructionism posits that all aspects of reality are shaped by social processes. It centers on the actions of individuals in society as they collectively construct their understanding of reality. Knowledge is developed and interpreted through these interactions, and social institutions like marriage are both upheld and shaped by these social dynamics (Andrews, 2012).

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' Structuration theory explains how people and society influence each other. Society creates rules and expectations, like the pressure for women to marry, but people also have the power to challenge and change these rules through their actions.

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. How do single Pakistani women perceive the concept of marriage and its impact on their empowerment?
2. What are the cultural and societal factors that influence single Pakistani women's decisions regarding marriage and empowerment?

Method

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study include:

1. To explore the narratives of marriage and empowerment among single Pakistani women.
2. To explore cultural and societal factors that can impact single Pakistani women empowerment?

Defining the Construct of Marriage and Empowerment

Two constructs of the present research are defined below:

Participant 1

Marriage

Marriage, which includes the coupling of two people possessing different interests, desires and needs, is a special association given shape by social rules and laws and significantly affects individuals' development and self-realizations (Ersanlı & Kalkan, 2008).

Empowerment

Empowerment is the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one's goals (Indiresan, 1999).

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 single women. The study is purely based on the qualitative method.

Figure 1
Demographic information of participant 1

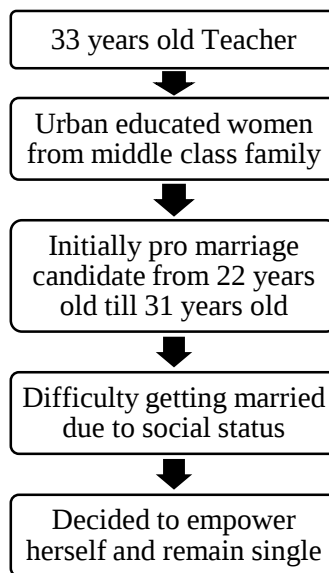


Figure 1 shows the demographic information of participant 1

Participant 2

Figure 2: Demographic information of participant 2

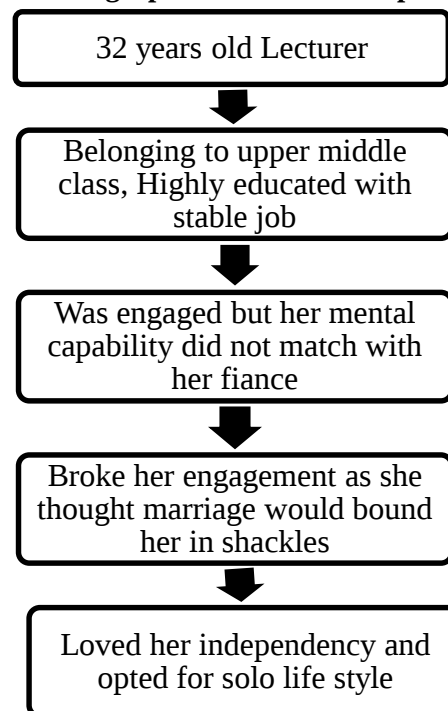


Figure 2 shows the demographic information of participant 2

Participant 3

Figure 3: Demographic information of participant 3

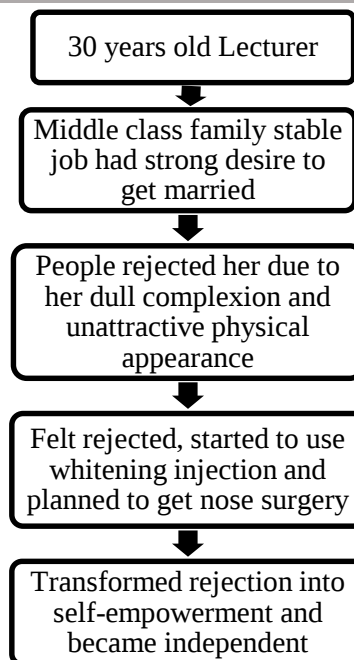


Figure 3 shows the demographic information of participant 3
Participant 4

Figure 4: Demographic information of participant 4

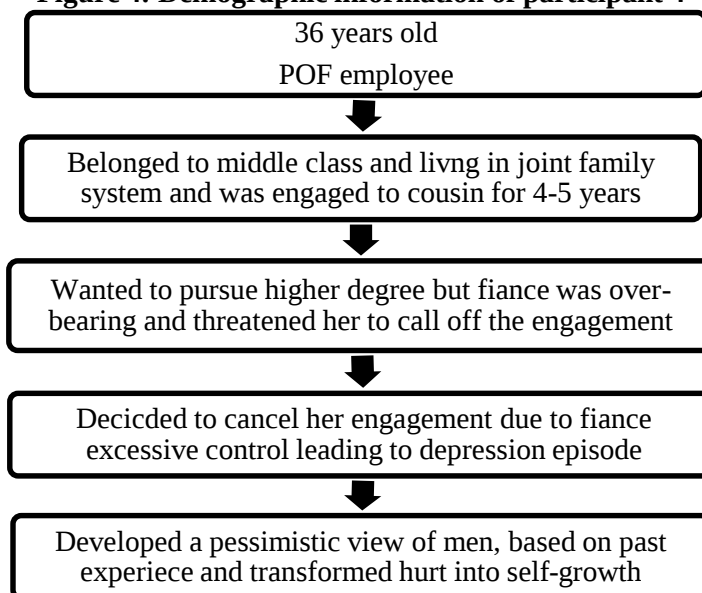


Figure 4 shows the demographic information of participant 4
Participant 5

Figure 5: Demographic information of participant 5

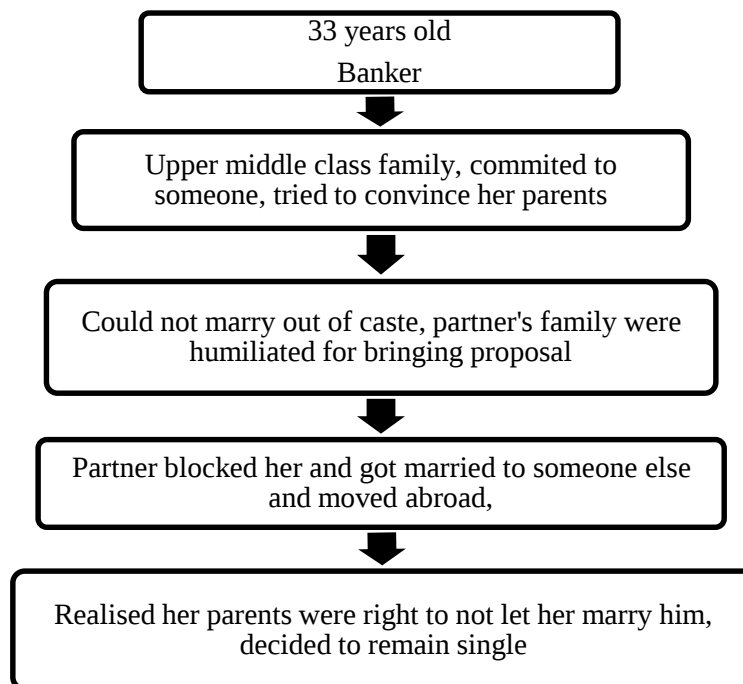


Figure 5 shows the demographic information of participant 5

Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

In current study sample was 5 single women. Women single above 25, never married will be included as well as data will be taken from educated women.

Exclusion Criteria

In this study the participants below age 25 and uneducated women will not be included.

Procedure

1. **Informed Consent.** Informed consent was obtained from unmarried empowered women before initiating interviews, ensuring their willingness to participate.
2. **Confidentiality.** Participating 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.

Demographic Information Sheet

Table 1: Demographic details of participants (N=5)

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

Results

Current chapter summarises the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis, along with providing a thorough exploration of the narratives and viewpoints of Pakistan unmarried women regarding marriage and empowerment. The interviews have

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.

provided significant details of themes, sub-themes, and codes. The six major themes are personal empowerment, complications in marriage process, family dynamics, psychological issues, societal struggles and beliefs and coping mechanism.

Table 2: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (N=5)

Major Themes	Sub Themes	Relevant Codes
Personal Empowerment	Personal Freedom	Autonomy and right awareness Unwillingness to compromise Emphasis on freedom preservation Freedom in decision making
	Career Oriented	Pursuing career goals Prioritizing personal and professional development Desire for independence
	Modification in Preference	Seeking shared values Prioritizing financial compatibility Importance of open communication Embracing self-reliance
Complications in Marriage Process	Hurdles in Matchmaking	Limited proposal options Socio-Economic rejection Relying on spiritual guidance
	Challenging Life Experience	Overcoming financial hardships Impact of past failed relationships
Family Dynamics	Familial Expectations and Demands	Familial expectations and 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
Societal Struggles and beliefs	Isolation and Challenges	Loneliness and social isolation Societal judgment and moral scrutiny Economic constraints affecting housing
	Cultural and Social Pressure	Navigating religious beliefs Societal attitudes
	Gender Inequality	Inherited biases Women's dependence on men Early and enforced marriages Expectation to compromise Caste and gender-based discrimination
	Traditional Beliefs	Stigmatization of single hood Early marriages as a religious obligations Objectifications of women
	Rigid Societal Structures	Limited freedom in partner choice Strict adherence to societal norms Negative opinions and uncooperativeness
Coping Mechanism	Self-reliance	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

Seeking Support

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

Figure 6: Major Theme 1: Personal Empowerment

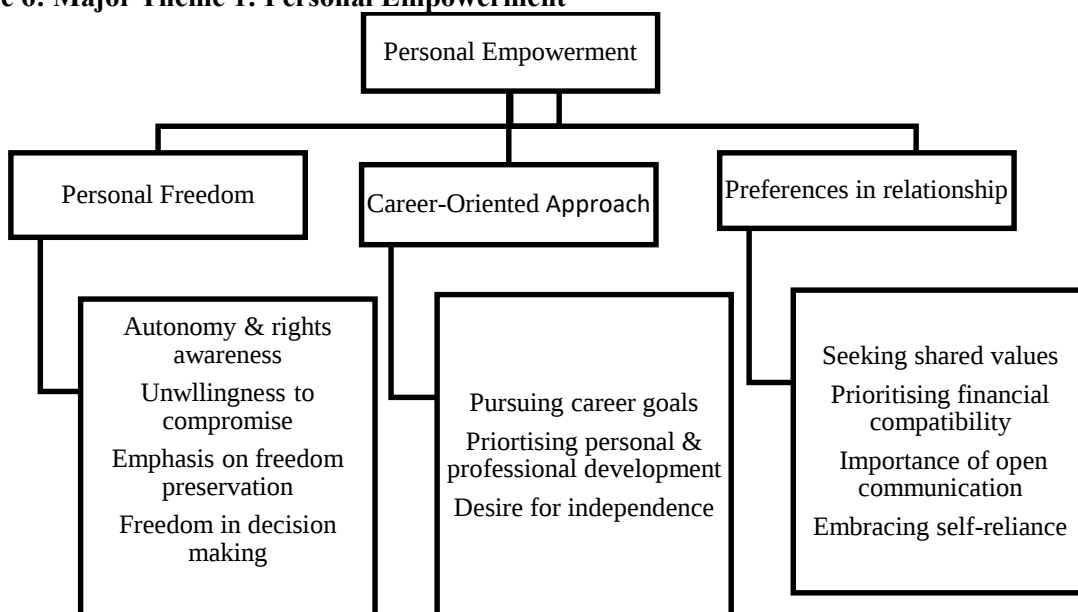


Figure 6: Showing major theme of Personal Empowerment with sub-themes and codes

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. P5 (female banker) quotes that,

میں اپنی آزادی کو بالکل بھی کسی کے لیے نہیں قربان کرونگی کیونکہ میں نے مالی طور پر خود کو خود مختار بنانے کے لیے بہت محنت کی ہے۔ میں کسی بھی چیز کے لیے اس پر سمجھوتہ نہیں کروں گی۔

"I refuse to sacrifice my personal freedom. I've worked hard to become financially independent. I won't compromise that for anything negative".

Another participant also shared similar views P3 (female lecturer) quotes that,

یہ ضروری ہے ہم اپنے حقوق کو جانیں۔ اس معاشرے کو ہم سے بہت سی توقعات ہیں، اس لیے یہ سب کچھ ہماری آزادی کے لیے ہے۔

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

Career-Oriented Approach

This theme displays how single 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. For instance P4 (female pof employee) quotes that,

میں صرف اپنے کیریئر کے بارے میں سوچتی ہوں
کیونکہ اس کیریئر سے میں ایک خود مختار بنی ہوں اور میں
نے اپنے لیے خود کمایا ہے آزاد رہ کے۔

“I am only thinking about my career because it has made me independent. It is giving me my own money and also my freedom”.

Similar opinions were shared by other participants. P5 (female banker) quotes that her profession provided her independence both personally and financially.

Preferences in Relationship

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. Single 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. P2 (female lecturer) quotes that,

شادی میں شامل دونوں فریقوں کے امن کے لیے مالی
طور پر ہم ابھنگ ہونا ضروری ہے۔

“Being financially compatible is essential for the peace of both the parties involved in the marriage”.

P1, a female teacher, quotes

میں اپنے پہلے تجربے کے بعد شادی کرنے کے بارے میں بالکل
بھی نہیں سوچنا چاہتی ہوں اس کی وجہ یہ ہے کہ مجھے اپنے
پہلے پروپوزل کے دوران بہت سے مسائل کا سامنا کرنا پڑا ہے۔

“I don’t want to think about getting married after my first experience. I faced so many issues during my first proposal”.

2. Complications in Marriage Process

Figure 7: Major Theme 2: Complications in Marriage Process

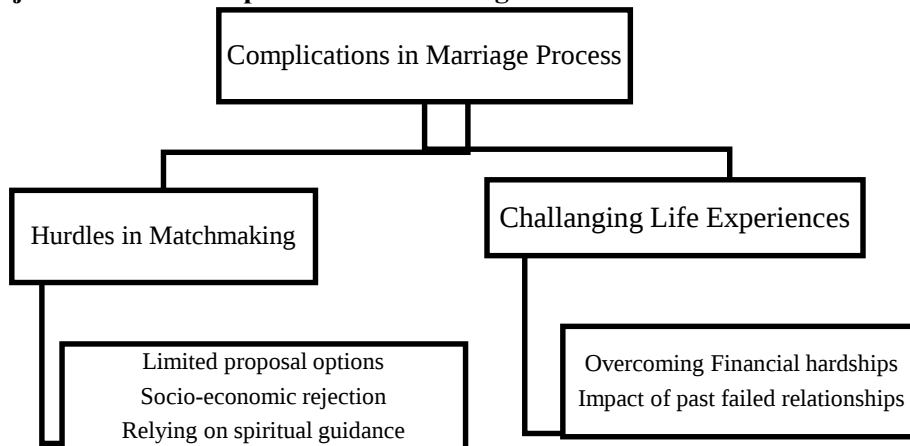


Figure 7: Showing major theme of Complication in Marriage Process with sub-themes and codes

Hurdles in Matchmaking

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 single 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.

For instance, P4 a pof employee stated that,

میری منگنی 5، 6 سال تک رہی تھی لیکن جس کے ساتھ رہی تھی وہ بہت بدتمیز سا تھا اس لیے میں نے یہ رشتہ توڑ دیا اس رشتے کے بعد مجھے بہت زیادہ ریجکشن ملیں کیونکہ میں ایک نچلے متوسط گھرانے سے ہوں۔

“I was engaged for 5, 6 years but the partner was so ill mannered that’s why I broke this relationship after this relationship I got so many rejections because I am from a below middle class family”.

It is sad when economic factors become a barrier. It undermines the other good qualities. P5, a female banker, expressed that people now use “Istikhara was not right” to reject a proposal. It has become really difficult to find a good match. Proposals fitting the criteria of both the family members and the person involved are scarce.

Challenging Life Experiences

It describes the different challenges that single 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. As P1, a female teacher said that,

میں اپنے خاندان میں اکلوتی کمانے والی ہوں۔ میں نے کماتے ہوئے بہت کچھ سیکھا ہے۔ جس سے نہ صرف میں نے خود کو بہتر بنایا ہے بلکہ میں نے خود کو باختیار بھی بنایا ہے۔

“I am the bread winner in my family. I learned a-lot while working. It not only helped me understand myself better but also empowered me”.

A rejection in marriage proposals is often faced by individuals facing difficult financial situations.

These past failed relationships in the personal history greatly affect the perception of marriage. These experiences shape their approach to relationships they form in the future.

Therefore, valuing independence and autonomy emerges as a central pillar among single woman. Overall, these various challenges portray the resilience, growth, and a steadfast commitment to individual empowerment. P3, a female lecturer, quotes

شادی کے پرپوزل میں بہت ساری ریجکشنز ملنے کے بعد میں اب اتنی مضبوط ہو گئی ہوں کہ میں نے شادی کے حوالے سے اپنا نظریہ ہی بدل لیا ہے۔

“Having so many rejections in marriage proposals have helped me become strong and changed my perspective regarding marriage”.

Familial expectations and demands. There are various complicated expectations and demands imposed on single women. They usually come from family opinions, conflicts between the members of the family regarding difference of opinion and pressure. P1, female lecturer, explained that, “My family is very traditional. Their old values put me in a lot of pressure. It is really hard to listen to them and also pursue my career.” P5, also a female banker, quotes, “My family wants me to marry into my own caste. They think caste is important for a happy married life. There are a lot of better proposals out of caste but my family does not agree with the idea of going out of caste.”

3. Family Dynamics.

Figure 8: Major Theme 3: Family Dynamics

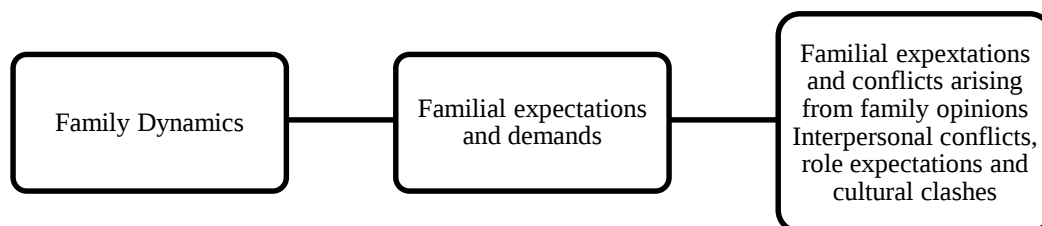


Figure 8: Showing major theme of Family Dynamics with sub-themes and codes

Familial expectations and demands

There are various complicated expectations and demands imposed on single 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 single 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 single woman must negotiate her identity within the familial context. A single 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 single woman is supposed to maintain to keep the peace and realize her own empowerment. P1, female lecturer, explained that,

میرا خاندان بہت روایتی خاندان ہے۔ ان کی پرانی روایتوں نے مجھے بہت مصیبت میں ڈال دیا ہے میرے لیے ہر وقت ان کی باتیں سننا اور ساتھ اپنے کیریئر کو آگے بڑھانا بہت مشکل ہے۔

“My family is very traditional. Their old values put me in a lot of pressure. It is really hard to listen to them and also pursue my career”.

P5, also a female banker, quotes,

میرے گھر والے چاہتے ہیں کہ میں اپنی ہی ذات میں شادی کروں۔ ان کے خیال میں خوشگوار زندگی گزارنے کے لیے یہ ذات وات بہت اہم ہے۔ ذات سے باہر بھی بہت بہتر اور اچے پریوزلز بھی ہیں لیکن میرے خاندان والے ذات سے باہر جانے کے خیال سے متفق ہی نہیں ہوتے ہیں۔

“My family wants me to marry into my own caste. They think caste is important for a happy married life. There are a lot of better proposals out of caste but my family does not agree with the idea of going out of caste”.

4. Psychological Issues

Another major theme is the mental strife faced by single women in Pakistan. It includes not only physical but also emotional and social challenges they face.

Figure 9: Major Theme 4: Psychological issues

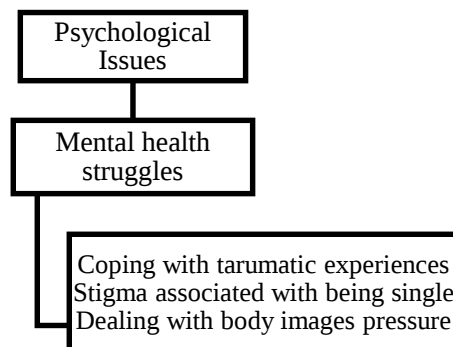


Figure 9: Showing major theme of Psychological Issues with sub-themes and codes

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 the single women in Pakistan.

Participant P3, (a lecturer) quotes,

میں ہمیشہ سے تھوڑی موٹی رہی ہونا اور لوگ مجھے میرے وزن، میرے نقش اور میری سیاہ رنگت کی وجہ سے ہمیشہ مجھے جج کرتے ہیں۔ لوگ مجھے مسلسل کہتے ہیں کہ مجھے اپنا کچھ وزن کم کرنا چاہیے اور ڈانٹ کرنی چاہیے تاکہ مجھے اچھا رشتہ مل جائے۔

“I have always been a little fat. People judge me for my weight, my features and for my dark complexion. They constantly tell me that I should reduce some weight and go on diets to find a good proposal”.

P1, a female lecturer stated that,

رشتے والے جب بھی آتے ہیں تو یہ امید دے کر چلے جاتے کہ وہ مطمئن ہیں لیکن بعد میں فون تک نہیں کرتے اور میں یہ سب سے کئی بار گزری ہونا اور اس سے مجھے کافی تکلیف ہوتی ہے اور، ہر بار لوگوں پر سے میں اپنا اعتماد کھو دیتی ہوں۔ خود کو سنبھالنا واقعی مشکل ہے۔ یہ معاشرہ واقعی غیر شادی شدہ لڑکیوں کے لیے بالکل بھی ٹھیک نہیں ہے۔

“Families would leave with the impression that they were satisfied but afterward they would not even call. I went through this a lot of times. It hurts me quite a bit and, each time I lost my confidence. It is really

difficult to keep myself together. This society is really damaging to the unmarried girls”.

5. Societal Struggles and Beliefs

Seeing how social factors are connected to marriage and empowerment perspective can help us understand the different complications that single women face. Furthermore it sheds light on gender inequality, traditional beliefs, and norms of the society that hinder any single 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: Major Theme 5: Societal Struggles and Beliefs

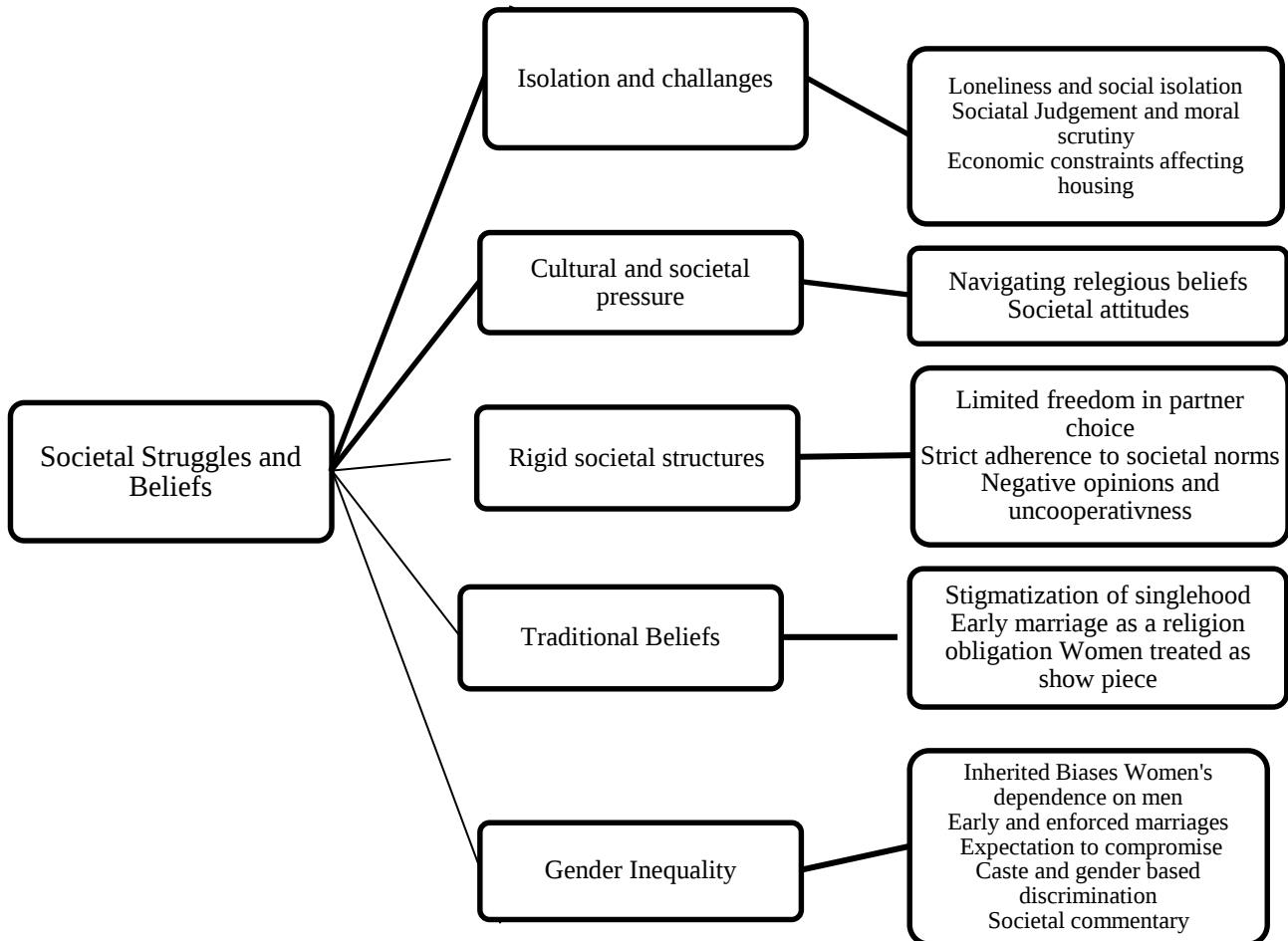


Figure 10: Showing major theme of Societal Struggles and Beliefs with sub-themes and codes.

Isolation and Challenges

Social struggles and loneliness involve the scrutiny of the society that results in isolation and economic

problems resulting from being deprived of help. Single woman usually find 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 single women faces while working to find their way. As stated by a participant P4, a female pof employee,

کیونکہ میرے تمام دوست شادی شدہ تھے اور ان کے بچے بھی تھے، اس کی وجہ سے میں جب بھی کسی محفل میں جاتی ہوں تو لوگ مجھے ایسے دیکھتے جیسے میں واقعی قابل رحم ہوں۔ اور اس عمر میں جیسے شادی نہ کرنا میرے لئے شرم کا مقام ہے۔

“Because all of my peers were married and had children, anytime I went to a gathering people would look at me like I was really pitiful. That not being married at this age was something I should be ashamed of”.

Cultural and Social beliefs

This major theme explores the scenarios where single 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 single 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 single 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.

As P5 (a female banker) quotes,

مجھے لگتا ہے کہ معاشرے کے پکے یہ اصول ہیں جن کو پورا کرنا لازمی کر دیا گیا ہے، خاص کر جب بات شادی کی ہو تو آپ پر اتنا دباؤ ڈالا جاتا ہے، اور یہ اصول صرف مذہبی عقائد کے بارے میں نہیں ہے بلکہ یہ اس بارے میں بھی ہے کہ معاشرہ اکیلی خواتین کو کس طرح دیکھتا ہے۔

“I feel like society has these unwritten rules, especially when it comes to marriage. There's this constant pressure to conform to certain norms, and it's not just about religious beliefs; it's also about how society perceives single women”.

P2 (female lecturer) quotes that,

ہمارے معاشرے میں کوئی بھی لڑکے کو شادی کے لیے مجبور نہیں کرتا۔ لیکن اسی عمر کی لڑکی کو مجبور کیا جائے گا بلکہ شادی نہ کرنے پر طعنہ بھی دیا جائے گا۔

“In our society no one would force a boy to get married. But a girl of the same age would be forced but also ridiculed for not wanting to get married”.

Gender Inequality

The term "Gender Inequality," explores the deep rooted problem of discrimination against single 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 single 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. As P1, (a female teacher) said,

لڑکے کسی بھی عمر میں شادی کر سکتے ہیں۔ انہیں یہ اعزاز حاصل ہے اور یہ اعزاز انہیں معاشرے نے دیا ہے کہ جب چاہیں شادی کر لیں۔

“Boys can get married at any age. They have this privilege given to them by the society”.

As for the girls, not only are they judged for being old but also if they married for a second time. This is how this society is. P2 (a female lecturer) quotes,

ہمارے ہاں بہت سارے والدین اپنی لڑکیوں کے لئے ذات کے اندر مناسب پریوزلز کا انتظار کرتے رہتے ہیں۔ وہ ذات سے باہر سوچنا بھی نہیں چاہتے ہیں بس پھر یہی وجہ ہے کہ بہت سی لڑکیوں کی صحیح وقت پر شادی نہیں ہوتی۔

“Traditional parents will keep their girls waiting for a proper in-the-caste proposal. They don't even want to consider the other castes. This is why many girls don't get married at right time”.

P3 another female lecturer said,

مرد کسی بھی لڑکی سے شادی کر سکتا ہے چاہے وہ اس کی ذات سے ہو یا ذات سے باہر کی ہو۔ لیکن لڑکی ذات سے باہر نہیں جا سکتی اگر وہ ایسا کر بھی لے تو وہ خاندان اور معاشرے دونوں کے لیے شرمندگی کا سبب بن جاتی ہے۔

“Men can go and marry a girl even if she is out of his caste. But a girl cannot go out of caste. If she does, she is shamed by the family and the society alike”.

P2 (a female lecturer) quotes,

میں نے محسوس کیا ہے کہ میرے اردگرد کے لوگ یہ بی چاہتے ہیں کہ میں شادی کر لوں اور آباد بوجاؤں وہ چاہتے ہیں کہ میں بھی ان کی طرح روایتی انداز میں رہوں۔ لوگ سمجھتے ہیں کہ عورتوں کو اپنی ضروریات کے لیے مردوں پر انحصار کرنا چاہیے۔ وہ نہیں چاہتے کہ ہم خود مختار ہوں۔

“I have felt that the people around me want me to settle down like my parents did. They want me to live in the same traditional manner as them. People think that women should be dependent on men for their needs. They don't want us to be independent”.

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 single 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 single 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 single women, enhancing the stereotypical roles and limiting their choices. Therefore, the sub-theme aided to shed light on the deeply ingrained traditional beliefs. P2 (a female lecturer) quotes,

لڑکی کی جیسے ہی عمر بھڑتی ہے تو وہ شادی کے لئے تیار ہو جاتی ہے۔ رشتے والے آتے اور چیک کرتے کہ آیا وہ ان کے بیٹے کے لیے مناسب ہے یا نہیں۔ اگر وہ مناسب نہیں سمجھی جاتی ہے تو اسے فوراً مسترد کر دیا جاتا ہے۔

“When a girl comes of age, she enters the marriage market. Families would come and check if she is suitable for their son or not. If she is not deemed suitable, she is rejected immediately”.

P3 another female lecturer quotes,

میں بہت سے ریجکشنز سے گزری ہوں۔ اور جیسے جیسے میں بڑی ہوتی گئی، میں نے خود پر سے سارا اعتماد کھو دیا۔ میں

شادی نہ کر سکنے کا ذمہ دار خود کو ٹھہرانے لگی تھی۔ لوگوں کی نظریں مجھے کھا رہی تھیں۔ لوگوں کا ماننا ہے کہ لڑکیوں کی شادی جوانی میں ہی کر دی جانی چاہیے۔ لیکن میں اب سمجھ گئی ہوں کہ مجھے ان پرانے عقائد کو قبول کرنے کی ضرورت نہیں ہے۔ مجھے اپنے لیے کچھ کرنا ہے۔ لوگ کس طرح پرانے اسپنسر کو دیکھتے ہیں میں یہ سب تبدیل کرنا چاہتی ہوں۔ وہ لوگ بھی تو انسان ہیں ان کی بھی تو امیدیں اور خواب ہیں۔

“I went through a lot of rejections. And as I got old, I lost all confidence in myself. I started to hold myself responsible for not being able to get married. The piercing gaze of the people was emotionally damaging for me. People believe that girls should get married while they are young. I have now realized that I don't have to accept these old beliefs. I have to stand up for myself. I want to change how people see old spinster. They are humans too that have hopes and dreams”.

Rigid societal structures

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 who is considered an acceptable match. Single 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. P1 (a female teacher) quotes that,

ہمارے معاشرے میں عورت کو روایتی طریقوں کے سانچے میں فٹ ہونا چاہیے۔ وہ اپنی مرضی سے کچھ نہیں کر سکتیں اور انہیں بتایا جاتا ہے کہ کس طرح برتاؤ کرنا ہے خاص طور پر جب شادی کی بات آتی ہے۔ ہم لڑکیاں کچھ بھی نہیں کر سکتیں سوائے اس کے کہ جو ہمیں بتایا گیا ہے اس پر عمل کرنے کے۔

“In our society a woman is supposed to fit into this perfect mould of traditional values. Their choices are limited and they are told how to behave especially when it comes to getting married. There is nothing we can do except follow what we're told”.

6. Coping Mechanism

Figure 11: Major Theme 11: Coping Mechanism

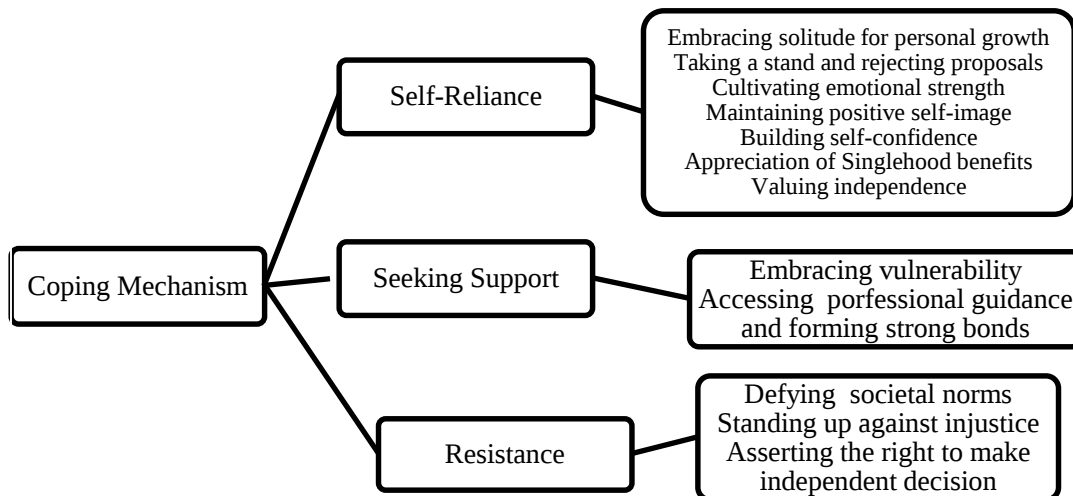


Figure 11: Showing major theme of Coping Mechanisms with sub-themes and codes

Self-reliance

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 signifies the benefits that come with being single. It leads to active approach to personal development through resilience and independence while maintaining a strong sense of self.

As P5 (a female banker) quotes,

جب سے میں نے یہ حقیقت قبول کی ہے کہ میں اکیلی ہوں اس کے بعد سے میں ذہنی اذیت سے آزاد ہو گئی ہوں۔ میں اب اپنی زندگی سے بہت خوش ہوں کیونکہ میں اب اپنے خوابوں کو پورا کر سکتی ہوں۔ یہ معاشرہ لڑکیوں پر اتنا دباؤ ڈالتا ہے کہ وہ سنگل رہنے کے مثبت پہلو اور اس سے ملنے والی آزادی کو بھول ہی جاتی ہیں۔

“Accepting the fact that I am single has freed me from mental torture. I now enjoy my personal space and time. I can go after my dreams. This society puts so much pressure on the girls that they forget the

positives of being single and the freedom that comes with it”.

P1 female teacher quotes that,

اب میں صرف اپنے آپ پر توجہ دیتی ہوں۔ میں نے اس وقت بہت تھوڑے سے پرسنل نہ ہونے کا ایک اچھا فیصلہ لیا تھا۔ اس مشکل وقت سے گزرنے کے بعد، میں بہت زیادہ طاقت ور اور مضبوط ہو گئی ہوں۔ مجھے اب اکیلا اور آزاد رہنا پسند ہے۔ میں جیسی ہوں میں نے خود کو قبول کر لیا ہے اور یہی میری جیت ہے۔

“Now I only focus on myself. It was a good decision to not settle for less. After going through that hard time, I have attained a great deal of emotional strength. I now like being single and free. I have accepted myself and that is my victory”.

Seeking Support

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, single 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 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. P1, a female teacher quotes,

سنگل ہونے کا مطلب ہے کہ میں اپنے فیصلے خود کرنے کے لیے آزاد ہوں۔ میں اپنے طریقے سے زندگی جیتی ہوں اور میں نے ایک ایسا راستہ چنا ہے جس سے میں نے اپنے آپ پر بہت زیادہ اعتماد حاصل کیا ہے۔

“Being single means that I am free to make my own decisions. I live on my own terms and I have a chosen a path a like. It has made me gain a lot of confidence in myself”.

P3, another female lecturer said that,

میں نے بہت سی لڑکیوں کو اپنے جیسی حالت میں پایا ہے میں نے آن لائن نئے دوست بنائے اور نئے کنکشن بنائے۔ جس سے مجھے بہت اچھا اور تعاون کرنے والا ماحول ملا ہے۔

“I found a lot of girls in a similar situation as me. I was able to make new friends and build new connections through this online community. It has provided me with a good supportive environment”.

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. Single 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. As P2, (a female lecturer) quotes,

اب لوگوں کی وجہ سے میں خود کو بدلنے والی نہیں ہوں۔ میں اب اپنے طریقے سے زندگی جینا چاہتی ہوں۔ مجھے آزاد

ی کی زندگی گزارنے کا پورا حق اور میں یہ اپنا حق استعمال کروں گی۔

“I am not going to change because people want me to. I am going to live on my own terms. I will use my right to be free and independent”.

Similar views were shared by P5, (a female banker) who said,

میں اس معاشرے کے روایتی طریقوں کو بدلنا چاہتی ہوں۔ میں اس معاشرے میں لڑکیوں کے ساتھ ہونے والی ناانصافیوں کے خلاف آواز اٹھانا چاہتی ہوں میرا ماننا ہے کہ لڑکیوں کو اپنے حقوق سے آگاہ ہونا چاہیے یہ معاشرہ ہر طرح کی لڑکی کو ایک جیسا سمجھتا ہے۔ انہیں لڑکیوں کو ایک موقع دینا چاہیے کہ وہ اپنی مرضی سے وہ فیصلے کریں جو وہ کرنا چاہتے ہیں۔ لڑکیوں کو اپنا راستہ خود چننا چاہیے اور خود کو باختیار بنانا چاہیے۔

“I want to change the traditional ways of this society. I want to stand up against the injustice girls have to face in this society. I believe that girls should be aware of their rights. This society understands the situation of the young and old unmarried girls alike. They should give them a chance to make the decisions they want to make without prejudice. The girls should get to define their path and empower themselves”.

The results explain the varied life experiences of single women in Pakistan. The experiences are in relation to their marriage and empowerment. The major themes are: Personal Empowerment; Challenges in Marriage; Family Dynamics; Social Struggles; Psychosocial Struggles; Cultural and Societal Beliefs; Personal Coping Mechanisms. Together, they extensively explain the challenges these women face. Each theme uncovers a unique aspect of their journey. It focuses on the connection between personal aspirations, societal pressures, and individual resilience. The diverse collection of participant's comments with in these themes elaborate their narratives. The comments focus on the strength and commitment exercised by single women. They shape their lives and challenge societal expectations. These findings provide a valuable insight on gender roles, empowerment, and societal dynamics. It emphasizes the need for a better understanding of the experiences of single women in the cultural context of Pakistan.

Table 3: Content Validity Ratio Analysis of Emergent Themes (N=5)

Themes	A	N	CVR
Personal empowerment	3	3	1
Complications in marriage process	3	3	1
Family dynamics	3	3	1
Psychological issues	3	3	1
Societal struggles and beliefs	2	3	0.3
Coping mechanism	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 discussion will navigate through the intersections of societal expectations, personal agency, and the dynamic cultural landscape, aiming to provide a nuanced comprehension of the challenges, coping mechanisms, and empowerment narratives woven into the fabric of these women's lives.

Personal Empowerment

Personal empowerment refers to the process that can enhance the capacity of an individual to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Gilat, 2015). Women's personal empowerment refers to their ability to autonomously and harmoniously manage their lives, both within and beyond the confines of their households. It improves their capacity to exert influence over social change and create structured social and economic systems (Sepotokele, 2018). Women's capacity to exercise autonomy in decision-making enhances their self-assurance and has the potential to further enhance their empowerment (Xheneti et al., 2019). It empowers women to demonstrate their abilities independently. Their cognitive patterns undergo a transformation, leading them to willingly assume the role of mentors for one another. This feminist action grants women increased personal agency as they unite to create a network, so facilitating social integration and

establishing their long-term societal significance (Asif & Fayyaz, 2024).

The theme of personal empowerment was most discussed topic in all participant interviews. Participant highlighted career orientation, autonomy and partner preferences as source of personal empowerment. These findings are in line with existing literature. Khan et al. (2019) contend that women in Pakistan typically aspire for freedom. Batool and Batool (2019) reported in her study that educated women who are employed and financially independent tend to have a higher level of empowerment compared to educated women who do not engage in any form of paid work.

Similar opinions were shared by other participants. P5 quotes (female banker) stated that her profession provided her with independence both personally and financially.

United Nation (UN, 2016) survey revealed that empowerment of skilled working women was attributed to their greater autonomy and financial independence. In regards to partner preferences, participants reported that it plays a vital role in their personal empowerment. This aligns with previous literature, Malik et al. (2020) reported that females proffered their future husband to earns twice as them as it signifies financial security and stability of their future.

Complications in Marriage Process

In our study the next major theme highlighted by participant was complication in marriage process. Current study revealed that there are many hurdles in matchmaking process; the one most highlighted by participant narrative was caste issue. Marriage in same caste is preferred however this limits the option for women.

Study reported that couples that marry out of their caste become social outcasts and lack family support (Xheneti et al., 2019). This was affirmed by Malik et

al. (2020) who reported that it is preferred that marriage happens within the same sect/caste to avoid religious differences and conflicts. He further reported that in our society preferences in regards to marital process are influenced by societal norms and culture, as these norms have been deeply rooted in us since the very beginning and so conflicting opinions or decisions are not welcomed by the family.

In regards to challenging life experiences participant reported “financial hardships” and past failed relationship have changed their perspective regarding marriage and made them more focused on being self-empowered. These findings are in congruence with previous study, McDougal et al. (2018) reported in their study that economic circumstances influence marriage decisions. Their study results concluded that marriage decision are linked to not having enough money, which suggests a major indirect way that money problems stop people from getting married.

In regards to negative relation in past and marriage issue study reported that in context of Pakistan, the main social and cultural factors that delay marriageability in educated women was lack of suitable match, dowry, caste, sectarian affiliation, and previous commitments (Sultana et al., 2021). Similar views were shared by Rafiq et al. (2022) reported that family issues and intimate relationships problems influence the decision of women whether they want to get married or not. For instance not being able to find the right person, past break ups and so forth.

Family Dynamics

Marriage is a deeply ingrained component of Pakistani culture. Shehzad (2021) emphasised in his study the need of stability and durability for all members of society, not just married couples. Marriage represents the union of two homes, and parents make the majority of marriage arrangements in our society (Ghazal et al., 2022). Ghazal et al. (2022) found that one of the contributing factors to delayed marriages is parents' incorrect decisions concerning their children's marriages. They also stated that the caste system, in addition to physical/personal, socioeconomic, and familial sociocultural considerations, is a major reason of late marriages. Saleem et al. (2015) found that caste, as well as female literacy and socioeconomic standing,

were among the primary factors for delayed marriages.

The major theme of family dynamics highlights how family rules and beliefs hinder women empowerment and marriage process. Parents always play an important part in delaying their children's marriages. When it comes to organizing their children's weddings, many Muslim parents continue to rely on cultural rites connected with social position, honor, and prestige. Unnecessary and elaborate rites and ceremonies are done on a mandatory basis, if not to silence the wagging tongues of extended family members (Khubaib et al., 2020). Participants reported that parents want them married but in their own caste. This leads to delay in marriage. Rehman and Arooj (2023) reported that parents want to marry their daughters but in their community/caste. Caste and sect-bound endogamous marriages are preferred due to prior acquaintance, improved compatibility between the spouses, and the simplicity of pre-nuptial negotiations (Bhatti, 2014). According to Sultana et al. (2021), the most common reason identified in their study for marriage postponement is the need to marry within caste. According to respondents, parents favoured their own blood (khoon) while looking for a spouse, and if a suitable match within the family is not available, the girls have little choice but to remain celibate. Many good offers from outside the caste were declined in order to preserve the sacredness of our culture (Sultana et al., 2021). So, they have to wait a long time for the right proposal to come from someone in the same caste or society.

Cross-cultural research showed that women are likely to feel pressured by their co-workers, family, and friends if they are not married by the time they are in their late 20s or early 30s. Himawan (2018) reported that decision to get marry is influenced by a set of complex factors i.e. family, social and external factors along with individual's life experience and perceptions.

Psychological Issues

The major themes of psychological issues highlighted participants how their single hood has influenced their mental health. Participants reported that they feel “left out”, people give them “judgmental looks”, and they are “pitied” for their status. Facing such situations negatively influences

on their mental health. This goes in line with previous studies, Sultana et al. (2021) reported that prolonged singleness sometimes leads to an unhealthy state of mind among unmarried girls. They further added that such women face find it difficult to overcome the feelings of loneliness due to facing discrimination and feeling left out from social gatherings based on their single status. Single women develop low self-esteem when they compare themselves to their siblings, who are happy and settled in life. Many other women had similar feelings about their family members' indifferent attitudes toward their pleasure, emotions, well-being, and any other requirements they may have. Single women's stories reveal that they feel depressed and inferior to married women (Sultana et al., 2021).

Being pitied is the "worst sort of feeling" she added. The negative social stigma associated with their single status makes their lives even more difficult. Also participant reported that "physique" matters a lot in getting married.

This is in line with previous literature; there is a societal pressure for slimmer brides as it is considered a sign of beauty (Hasan et al., 2019). According to Sultan et al. (2020), effective individualism and physical appearance are key personal attributes for marriage delay for instance failing to meet the groom's family's stringent requirement, which included visiting their houses, feasting themselves, and then rejecting them based on different physical qualities such as dark complexion, short height, being overweight, and so on. As According to Rehman and Arooj (2023), stereotyped beliefs of society and beauty standards play a significant part in growing delayed marriages or never-married women.

Societal Struggles and Beliefs

In regards to major theme of societal struggles and beliefs, participants' narrative highlighted social isolation and rigid societal structures. The findings are in line with previous ones. Marriage has always played an important role in the lives of Pakistani women. However societal and familial expectations take precedence over single women's ambitions and desires (Sultana et al., 2021). According to sociological research, never married singles have historically faced discrimination and stigma in numerous countries. Yusuf (2018) claimed that

singleness is frowned upon in traditional homes across the country. Much of it is related to "لوگ کیا کہیں گے۔" Previous research indicates that in Pakistan, like in many other South Asian societies, parents rush to arrange their daughters' marriages because the older they are at marriage, the greater the hazards to their chastity and honor (Bhatti, 2014). Singleness is perceived as contradicting ideals of femininity, marriage, and motherhood, drawing many social stigma and stereotype practices (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). In many traditional and patriarchal communities, women's singleness after a certain age is considered a misnomer. Such women are blamed and often pitied for their situation. So much so that blame can be attributed to flaws in her or his personal character (Sultana et al., 2021). Women are frequently blamed and pitied for their situation based on perceived character flaws (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). The negative consequences of singlehood indicate loneliness and the lack of a social support network, which becomes increasingly important as women age and frailty. Sultana et al. (2021) reported in her study that women in their study were well aware of the various negative labels assigned to them, and they were dissatisfied with their negative social perception, which is reflected through various derogatory terms such as lonely woman (akaili aurat), deprived woman (bechaari aurat), unfortunate (badqismat), spinster (charri), celebrate (kunwari), and so on, which were used by friends, acquaintances, and strangers. They further added that single women endure social misconceptions and shame because they were not chosen. Single women are also portrayed as incomplete since their failure to marry is viewed as a personal defect that prevents them from being selected as someone's spouse. It is heartbreaking when those around them assume they have something wrong with them since they have failed to settle in life like other girls (Sultana et al., 2021).

Participants also noted that distortion of Islamic teachings in our society has had a significant impact in single hood. Religion, according to Rehman and Arooj (2022), is also misinterpreted while describing social-cultural and religious practices of mate selection and initiating marriage proposals. Participants also noted that distortion of Islamic teachings in our society has had a significant impact in single hood. Religion, according to Rehman and

Arooj (2022), is also misinterpreted while describing social-cultural and religious practices of mate selection and initiating marriage proposals.

In regards to gender inequality being the main issue that leads to late marriage and also causes hurdles in empowerment. In our culture, women are forbidden to remain single and continue to live alone in their life. Women are frequently blamed and pitied for their situation based on perceived character flaws (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). The negative consequences of single hood indicate loneliness and the lack of a social support network, which becomes increasingly important as women age and frailty.

Coping Mechanism

Regarding coping, participants expressed self-reliance, seeking support, and resistance to society standards. The findings are consistent with prior research. Sultana et al. (2021) reported that when people continue to question single women for not adhering to the conventional norm of being in a marital union, and over time, they learn to be patient and show others that they are content in their lives. Similarly Winterstein (2014) found that unmarried women experience a sense of comfort and satisfaction in life due to their ability to exert control over their lives and make decisions with greater independence. By choosing to remain unmarried and devoting their time and energy only to themselves, individuals can advance in life and experience greater freedom and happiness, as shown by Shahrak et al. (2023).

Regarding the role of social support in coping with being single. It is consistent with prior research. Unmarried women reported that their relatives and friends were the primary individuals in their lives and provided support in dealing with personal issues (Shahrak et al., 2023). Studies have indicated that women who have independent employment and come from educated and stable households exhibit greater reluctance in making the decision to marry, hence questioning the prevailing cultural standards (Rafiq et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Current study was conducted with the aim of understanding the perspective of single women regarding marriage and empowerment in Pakistan. Pakistan being a collectivist and patriarchal country

had always snubbed the rights of women. However as seen in our study the trends have changed overtime. Now women are letting go of their traditional roles and exploring new dimensions. Based on the narratives of our participants it can be concluded that although participants had desire to be married but the experience they had overtime made take the decision to be empowered. They still have the desire to be married but in their own terms. And even if they are not married they are still satisfied with their single status.

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.
4. Since the study focused on deeply rooted cultural norms in Pakistan, its findings may not be relevant to women from other cultures.

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 single women that offer mental health and financial independence.
3. Current study has paved the path for future studies to be conducted on experiences of single women residing in different regions of Pakistan. 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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Appendices

Interview Guideline

اس تحقیق کا مقصد درج ذیل تحقیقی سوالات کی چھان بین کرنا ہے۔
اس تحقیقی مطالعہ کا مقصد ایک سوال تھا:

پاکستان میں غیر شادی شدہ خواتین نے شادی نہ کرنے اور باختیار ہونے کا فیصلہ کیوں کیا؟
انٹرویو کے سوالات

- 1- کیا آپ نے کبھی شادی کے بارے میں سوچا ہے؟
- 2- آپ نے کب فیصلہ کیا کہ آپ شادی نہیں کرنا چاہتی؟ اور کیا وجوہات ہیں جن کی وجہ سے آپ نے یہ فیصلہ کیا؟
- 3- آپ کے خیال میں اگر آپ کی شادی ہو یا آپ کیسا محسوس کرتی ہیں جب آپ کے خاندان یا دوستوں میں سے کوئی شادی کرتا ہے؟
جائے گی تو کیا ہوگا؟
- 4- آپ کتنے عرصے سے سنگل ہیں، کیا آپ اپنی موجودہ سنگل سٹیٹس سے مطمئن ہیں؟
- 5- آپ کے خاندان کے لوگوں کی شادی شدہ اور غیر شادی شدہ خواتین کے بارے میں کیا رائے ہے؟
- 6- کون سی وجوہات ہیں جو آپ کو سنگل رہنے پر مجبور کرتی ہیں؟ کیا آپ کسی خاص شخص کی تلاش میں ہیں یا آپ سنگل رہنا پسند کرتی ہیں؟
- 7- کیا آپ نے سنگل ہونے کی وجہ سے کبھی کسی پریشانی کا سامنا کیا ہے؟
- 8- کیا آپ کو سنگل ہونے کی وجہ سے کبھی کسی معاشرتی دباؤ کا سامنا کرنا پڑا ہے؟
- 9- کیا آپ کا کوئی خاص مقصد یا خواہش ہے جو آپ سنگل رہ کے حاصل کر رہی ہیں؟
- 10- سنگل رہ کر آپ کس طرح اپنے اختیارات کو بہتر بنا سکتی ہیں؟
- 11- سنگل رہ کر آپ کس طرح خود کو مالی اور معاشرتی طور پر مضبوط بنا تی ہیں؟
- 12- آپ کو جاب شروع کرتے وقت کوئی مسائل تو نہیں پیش آئے، کیا آپ کے والدین آپ کی جاب کے لیے آسانی سے مان گئے تھے؟
- 13- کیا آپ کی شادی نہ کرنے کی وجہ یہ تو نہیں ہے کہ شادی کرنے کے بعد آپ کی جاب چلی جائے گی اور آپ باختیار ہونا چاہتی ہیں؟
- 14- آپ نے اس جاب کی وجہ سے کبھی کسی مشکل کا سامنا کیا ہے، آپ کے خیال میں خواتین کو جاب کرنی چاہیے یا نہیں؟
- 15- آپ کے خیال میں باختیار ہونے کے لیے سنگل رہنا ضروری ہے؟ اور کیا باختیار ہونے کے لیے جاب کرنا ضروری ہے۔