

## Pakistan's Rising Women Empowerment: A Mixed Methods Study

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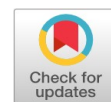
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**Abstract:** Pakistan has made visible progress in empowering women through education. Though enrollment of females in primary education is low, yet women have surpassed men in higher degree programs. Pakistani women reflect a positive picture of women empowerment by contributing to every walk of life. In the past two decades, when Pakistan was focusing on empowering women, a significant rise has been observed in domestic violence against women and suicide rate among them. Domestic violence and suicide attempt are crimes according to Pakistani laws. In the light of Social Disorganization Theory, the present research draws a unique connection of rising women empowerment with a clash of traditional ideals and modern approaches. It underscores the importance of the issue ignored by social scientists, civil society, and the government of Pakistan. The social disorganization theory describes the factors present in the surrounding environment responsible for the increased crime rate. The present study explores and discusses those factors in the societal struggle to maintain social ideals and modern approaches in parallel. This qualitative study employs a mixed-methods design and uses an in-depth literature review, close-ended questionnaires, and open-ended interviews to achieve the research objectives. The study randomly selects its sample (n=150) from different educational backgrounds and age brackets. While stressing transforming the societal perceptions, the study findings highlight the underlying problems and challenges women face in the struggle for empowerment. The study concludes that if women, being the “Social Fathers” of society, continue to suffer, it will bring catastrophic effects to the whole social fabric of Pakistan. Furthermore, the study provides limitations and directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Gender equality, Domestic violence, Violence against women (VAW), Traditional ideals, Modern approaches, Social disorganization theory, Mixed-methods, Pakistan

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### INTRODUCTION

Education is considered the key to empowerment and attaining social stability and national growth. In recent decades, Pakistan has witnessed that the ratio of females at the university level has surpassed their male counterparts; despite females' low enrollment in primary education. The government has paid much attention to female education; hence urban sphere of Pakistan is portraying the true ideal of women empowerment. Pakistani women are contributing to every walk of life. To maintain gender balance in civil services and politics, women are also allocated special quotas (Muhammad, Rahim, & Hanif, 2019). The country of empowered women like Benazir Bhutto, Arfa Karim, and Malala Yousafzai is considered the sixth most dangerous place for women on earth (Ali, 2018). 90% of women are victims of domestic violence (Shah, 2021). More than a thousand girls and women become victims of “honor killing” annually (Khan, 2021). Just like uneducated and poor women, empowered and financially independent women are also facing domestic violence in Pakistan (Zarar, 2018). Moreover, a significant surge has been observed in the female suicide rate in the last few years. Most women who commit suicide fall between 22-30 years (Ilyas, 2021). According to Women, Peace and Security Index (2017), 27% of Pakistani women reported having an abusive relationship with their intimate partners (WPS-Index, 2017). Only 2% of suicide cases are reported to police, and 97-98 percent are kept hidden by the families due to social stigma (WORLD, 2018). According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), 649 women have committed

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suicide in 2020 (Ilyas, 2021). Though there is no governmental data on the increased suicide ratio among women, non-governmental sources reveal that educated women are more prone to suicide, just like domestic violence. Other forms of violence, including sexual harassment (Baloch, 2021) and acid attacks (Nigwari, 2021) are the dark sides of so-called women empowerment. Despite all the efforts, the domestic violence and suicide rate are continuously rising with improving women's education rates in the country. It is crucial to identify the factors creating hindrances and obstacles in empowering educated women of Pakistan in a true sense. If in-time efforts are not made to address such challenges, the country may face catastrophic social disorder because women are the social fathers of a nation, and their problems will lead the succeeding generations in serious trouble. This paper highlights the factors contributing to a booming rate of domestic violence against women and suicide among the educated females of Pakistan.

### **Study Objectives and Research Questions**

The research aims to explore and analyze the struggle of educated women with a modern approach to satisfy traditional ideals in Pakistan. Following are the study objectives:

- To examine the picture of women empowerment in Pakistan.
- To investigate the impact of education on women's empowerment in Pakistan.
- To examine the disproportionate relationship between women's empowerment through modern education and traditional ideals.

To achieve study objectives, the paper addresses the following research questions in depth:

- What is the societal understanding of women's empowerment in Pakistan?
- What is the relationship between education and women empowerment?
- Why is the rate of domestic violence against women more in developed and well-educated Pakistan?
- Why educated women in Pakistan are getting more prone to suicide?
- Why is the modern education model incommensurate to traditional ideals?

### **Study Significance**

The study helps to understand the relationship between education and women empowerment and the factors affecting women empowerment in Pakistan. It also helps to formulate effective policies to improve the status of women in Pakistani society that is crucial to social stability and national growth. As no significant work has been done on why education failed to empower women in Pakistan? The present research provides a foundation for future social scientists. The study's findings develop interest among the social sciences scholarship to study other world areas in this very context.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptualizing Women Empowerment**

Empowerment is an umbrella term that usually measures the degree of autonomy and self-determination among individuals and groups or communities, enabling them to represent themselves and their interests responsibly and self-determined. The term was coined in the 1970s in response to justice and gender equality (Mackey & Petrucka, 2021). Numbers of Social Scientists have come up with different definitions of empowerment. Robert Adams defined empowerment as "the capacity of individuals, groups or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives (Annan, Donald, Goldstein, Martinez, & Koolwal, 2021)." Similarly, Chen and Tanaka refers women empowerment as "a process of increasing women's access to control over the strategic life choices that affect them and access to the opportunities that allow them fully to realize their capacities" (Chen & Tanaka, 2014). According to another definition (Rappoport, 2000), "empowerment is an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of resources gain greater access to and control over those resources". According to the definition of World Bank (In, 2017), "empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes". OXFAM (Kidder, 2017) refers women's economic empowerment as "the ability for women to enjoy their rights to control and benefit from resources, assets, income and their own time, as well as the ability to

manage risk and improve their economic status and well-being”. The definitions mentioned above help find the gaps in the struggle of Pakistan towards women’s empowerment.

### **Overview of Women Empowerment in Pakistan**

Women make 49.2 percent (Country Meters, 2016) of the total population in Pakistan. Article 37 of the 1973 Constitution (The Constitution of The Islamic Republic of Pakistan) gives every girl a fundamental right to education. The enrollment of females at the primary level in Pakistan is 45.8 percent (CIA, 2016). Whereas at the middle level, the enrollment of females is 39 and male is 61 percent. Only 2% of the total population reach a higher degree level— current enrollment of women is 38%, and 62% are men (HEC Report, 2015). Just after partition, Madir e Millat (Mother of Nation) Fatima Jinnah started working to raise the socio-economic status of women in Pakistan (Sultana, 2003). During the tenure of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, women were given 10% seats in the National Assembly and 5% in provincial assemblies in Pakistan (Bari, 2000).

The constitution (The Constitution of The Islamic Republic of Pakistan) of 1973 assures gender equality. In 1988, when Benazir Bhutto became the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan, she made an observable contribution to raising women’s status. She set up women police stations, First Women Bank, etc. (Rafay, Habib, Tariq, & Ali, 2016). Afterward, many steps were taken by the governments to empower the women of Pakistan. Special quotas were allocated in government services, and free-of-cost education was provided till tenth grade. Moreover, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan has launched several scholarship programs to make education accessible to every citizen. Consequently, women’s growing participation is seen today in education, medicine, arts, and the military. Though apparently, women are seen in the limelight in Pakistan, the real face of the story is murky and gloomy. Pakistan ranks high among the most dangerous countries for women. Women are considered second gender and submissive to men. Honor killing and acid attacks are common phenomena. Every 1 out of 3 women is a victim of domestic violence (WHO, 2021). The rate of domestic violence against women is higher in urban areas with a high literacy rate.

Furthermore, in the last ten years, a noticeable increase has been observed in the suicide rate among women. In the Tharparkar region only, 125 females committed suicide in 2021 (Sheikh, 2021). Pakistan does not maintain the record of annual suicide rate; however unofficial record tells that just like domestic violence, educated women are more prone to suicide. Unfortunately, educated women are hesitant to file a case against the perpetrators. The discussion in the preceding sections unfolds the hidden facts. Despite high education and economic independence, women of Pakistan are still victims of domestic violence and found suicide the only escape from a captive environment.

### **Theory of Social Disorganization viz-a-viz Domestic Violence and Suicide**

Crimes like domestic violence and suicide are social products. Any crime in a society results from social disturbance (Henry, 2009). Every society is based on social institutions which work together to form a social organization. Stable social organization is crucial to sustaining social stability in society (Brown & Barnett, 1942). The disturbance in a social organization or social disorganization plays the core factor in generating social problems and evils. The theory of Social Disorganization is one of the most influential theories of sociology, which directly links social crimes with the neighborhood environment (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). According to this theory, any crime that prevails in society results from social factors around which an individual (perpetrator) interacts (Ciobanu, 2019). Domestic violence (Associates, 2012) and suicide are the crimes in Pakistan. Both crimes are the result of social disorganization in society. The high rate of domestic violence against educated women and suicide rate among them is the result of societal struggle in-between social ideals and modern approaches. The struggle of Pakistani society to bring up and educate their women on modern approaches and expect them to behave and act on social ideals is creating anxiety and depression among the individuals. Women face domestic violence and commit suicide. Details are discussed below:

### **Struggle for Traditional Ideals and Modern Approaches in Parallel**

Pakistan has failed to empower women according to the very definition of “empowerment” because its society has adopted a modern approach to lead the country towards development and prosperity. In contrast, their ideals are still traditional. An “Ideal” is anything considered perfect or a standard by a person, a group, or a society.

Traditional ideals mean the standards set by a society based on its traditional and cultural values. In addition, society has some social expectations and sanctions; expectations are those roles and tasks which are encouraged and accepted by the majority in society, whereas sanctions are discouraged and rejected by society. For example, in a traditional patriarchal society like Pakistan, a male is considered a guardian of a house, and a woman is a household manager. The man of the house takes every major decision of the family, and women are not allowed in the decision-making process; this is a traditional ideal practiced by a significant part of the society. Society expects all its women to submit their selves before the will of their men. Hence, “Traditional Ideals” can be defined as: “traditional ideals are the perceptions, attitudes, and actions which are based on cultural norms and traditions, accepted and encouraged by a society, and deviation from them is socially sanctioned (Clay, Ravaux, de Waal, & Zuberbühler, 2016).”

On the other hand, the “Modern Approach” is based on Western Liberal Ideology. It gives every individual of society the free will to lead one’s life. According to the modern approach: “humans are born free hence should not be chained in self-created social norms (UNO., 2019).” Every individual must be provided with the necessities of life. For example, the Modern approach teaches a woman to live her life according to her wish. It encourages her to break the social barriers and fight for her fundamental rights such as the right to live, education, marriage, etc. Education is a primary medium to develop and transmit modern approaches among succeeding generations. Education developed a modern approach in Malala Yousafzai and encouraged her to promote education among females in a terrorist-prone area of Pakistan. Still, as she challenged the traditional ideals, she faced a murder attack.

The trial of Pakistani society to keep traditional ideals and modern approaches in parallel has created a catch-22 situation. Modern approaches are constructed in the western world hence based on modern women empowerment principles such as self-recognition, self-independence, economic independence, freedom, and free will. Oppositely, traditional ideals demand women according to social expectations and sanctions. Pakistani traditional ideals demand a woman with high educational qualifications and holding a prestigious office, looking after the household activities, silently facing inhumane treatment and domestic violence, and behaving like a good lady by hiding it from society and pretending everything is fine. Pakistani society’s ideals for women with expectations to play their social role on traditional ideals and modern approaches are neither achievable nor possible. Just to understand the very situation, let’s take the example of social media platforms where educated Pakistani women face bullying and harassment. According to a survey, 70% of females in Pakistan are scared of putting their photos on Facebook (Shackle, 2019). It is crucial to transform traditional ideals on modernization and civilization to make them proportional to modern approaches. Otherwise, the results would be devastating.

One of the common factors contributing to domestic violence in Pakistan is transforming women’s behavior towards the traditional ideal of society. Women have started challenging social ideals because education liberates them. As a consequence of rebellious attitudes towards traditional ideals, women face societal pressure; domestic violence is the most common phenomenon. Though Islam prohibits suicide, it is a crime according to Pakistani laws, yet women consider it an ultimate remedy to get rid of all problems. According to the theory of social disorganization developed by the University of Chicago (Ciobanu, 2019), the external environment directly impacts criminal activities in a particular place. It seems true in the case of Pakistan’s increased suicide ratio among women. Even if a woman succeeds in breaching traditional ideals and attaining a leadership role, she becomes a victim of societal pressure and mostly gets killed. Following are some cases mentioned for more clarity on the issue.

In 2017, a girl committed suicide because her parents were frustrated because she was not getting married. Her parents showed their educated daughter to many families with the aim of her marriage. Still, she was rejected for various reasons like complexion, height, financial background, etc. She faced negative criticism, physical abuse, and mental torture on every rejection. At last, to put her parents at ease, she committed suicide and freed herself from all worries and anxieties. According to a respondent-a native of Gilgit, the region of Gilgit and Baltistan (GB) has the highest female education and suicide rate. The high suicide rate is based on women’s struggle between traditional ideals and the modern approach. GB is a remote area where government and international NGOs have launched higher education programs for women. Women are sent to Islamabad and Karachi, which were highly advanced cities. On their return, they find themselves misfit, according to traditional ideals. They are forced to live according to social expectations and sanctions. Educated women are forced to marry less-educated men and cannot gain mental compatibility with their educated wives. Females are allowed to gain education just for the

sake of economic benefits. Females are used as a tool to serve their families economically, which is why they commit suicide out of frustration. Another respondent who got a gold medal from a prestigious university in the United States, when asked that why she did not marry, replied: “when I came back to Pakistan after completing my graduate studies from the US, number of reasonable men sent proposal at my place, but my family refused based on caste and race.” A generalized problem is mentioned in this paper’s findings and analysis part.

Another nineteen-year-old school teacher was burnt alive by her father over refusing a marriage proposal; afterward, she committed suicide (Police say ‘burned’ Murree girl committed suicide, 2016). A law student at the University of Punjab, Lahore, was stabbed twenty-three times by the son of a renowned lawyer of the city (Joseph, 2017). Hina Shahnawaz, an M.Phil degree holder, was shot dead by her cousin over refusing a marriage proposal (Idrees, 2017). Similarly, a female lawyer was shot dead; her only crime was to stand against inhumane acts. Some courageous women openly oppose social ideals to embrace the modern approach. Few examples are given to understand the height of barbarism they experienced in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto, the first female prime minister of Pakistan and the entire Muslim world, has lost her life in the struggle for democracy (Stratton, 2007). Malala Yousafzai survived a bullet because she wanted to see every Pakistani girl with a book and a pen in her hands (Schifrin, 2013). Qandeel Baloch lost her life due to breaching social ideals. Human Rights Activist Sabeen Mahmud was shot dead in Karachi in 2015 (Director T2F Sabeen Mahmud shot dead in Karachi, 2015). Ayesha Gulalai, a member of the Pakistani parliament, was threatened to throw acid on her face and tear her house down (Javid, 2017). She raised her voice against sexual harassment. She was openly threatened by a male member of a parliament for breaching traditions of tribal society, and he also discouraged the appearance of Ayesha before the media. Likewise, hundreds of others have left Pakistan after receiving life threats.

The discussion mentioned above unfolds the struggle of Pakistani society to maintain social order based on modern approaches and traditional ideals. Pakistani traditional ideals indeed contradict the modern approaches and cannot work parallel to each other. According to modern approaches, the transformation of social ideals is crucial to restoring social stability in society. The dire need for time is to make traditional ideals commensurate to modern approaches; otherwise, the whole social structure of the society will have an adverse effect in the form of personality and psychological disorders among females.

Research hypothesis proposed that Pakistani society with traditional ideals has adopted the modernized women empowerment approaches, i.e., empowerment through education. Educated women with modern approaches challenge the traditional ideals of society. Consequently, face domestic violence and commit suicide in reaction to domestic violence.

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers gathered data to learn educated women’s opinions and risk perceptions about their struggle in adopting modern approaches while satisfying the traditional ideals of the society. A mixed-methods approach has been used to collect the data by reviewing the literature and selecting a survey instrument with a mix of open-ended and close-ended questions. Both forms of data are integrated and analyzed. Expert individuals from the fields of International Relations, Sociology, and Psychology were invited to discuss the current research areas and identify and discourse the research variables. Experts were briefed on the topic, scope, nature, research questions, objectives, and significance through a detailed presentation by the researchers. In that meeting, research instrument, i.e., semi-structured interviews, were selected by keeping in view the demands of the study. Afterward, an interview guide was prepared. The interview guide was the primary tool in the current research prepared in the light of already available literature on the subject matter. The interview guide was distributed to the experts (members present in the initial meeting) for face validity. Later, the interview guide was further refined and improved in the light of valuable suggestions from experts. The interview technique adopted by the researchers is aimed to have shebang on every aspect that falls under the scope of the current research. The research population of this study comprises women from three different age groups (14-18, 18-24, 24-40) and educational backgrounds (Matric to Intermediate Level, Intermediate to Masters Level, and Masters to Mid-Career Professionals). A purposive sampling technique was used for participants’ selection. The study sample (n=150) comprises three distinct groups with fifty members each, selected randomly from the above age groups and educational backgrounds. Two of the researchers have personally visited the respondents and administered the survey to ensure the quality and authenticity of the research.

### Profiling of Respondents

The researchers have selected a sample population from three different age brackets and educational backgrounds for data collection. These females are either studying or doing jobs in Islamabad, the most civilized and modern city with the best education institutions and career pathways. The sample population is grouped into three groups. The first comprises fifty girls between the ages of 14-18 years who are enrolled in Matric or F.Sc, in different leading public and private schools of Islamabad. The second group consists of fifty women between 18-25 years of age enrolled in other Bachelor, Masters, and M.Phil. degree programs at colleges and universities. This group includes females working and studying in parallel and are at the start of professional careers. The third group comprises fifty professional women between the ages of 25-40. This group ranges from early to mid-career professionals, and few are enrolled in post-graduate degree programs. Three different questionnaires were prepared for each sample group. The questionnaire constructed for the sample group under 18 years was closed-ended, while the other two were a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions.

### Data Analysis

The entire survey was administered by the researchers while visiting the respondents personally. For close-ended questionnaires, the tabulation method is used to interpret the data. Open-ended interviews were audio-recorded with the prior consent of the interviewees. Most of the interviews were conducted in Urdu, hence transcribed by the researchers in English. Further, the transcribed interviews were reviewed by a socio-linguistic to ensure that translations and transcriptions have been done correctly. Analytical induction and comparison methods (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) extract the emergent themes from the interviews. The researchers explored the emerging themes resemblances and variances in the interviewees’ responses. Data analysis has been done by undergoing various steps. First, transcriptions of audio recordings were read repeatedly. Second, extraction of the themes was done through a systematic investigation based on similarities and differences in the interviewees’ responses. MAXQDA software is used for codification. It helps summarize the data and construct meaningful inferences. Third, transcription of the notes was done to make them understandable. Finally, themes were summarized, exemplified, and expounded to second the impressions (Smith, 2003). Additionally, interviewees have provided supplementary information irrelevant to research questions, which was included in earlier transcriptions but exempted during final analysis and writing.

### Ethical Considerations

Research ethics were strictly considered and obeyed in collecting data. The research objectives were kept transparent to the respondents. The respondents also gave verbal consent to the researchers to pen down and audio-record their interviews. The identities of the respondents are kept secret to maintain anonymity.

### RESULTS

This section of the paper discusses the results of three questionnaires developed to seek the opinion of women from three different age groups and educational backgrounds. Each table reflects the findings of one questionnaire developed for women from different age groups and economic backgrounds. The first table reveals the opinion of women from 14-18 years enrolled in Matric and F.A/F.Sc in Islamabad:

Table 1: Opinion of students of Matric/F.Sc (Age: 14-18 Years)

Values	Responses in%
1. Subjects Selection in Matric	18
2. Chose Subjects in F.Sc	37
3. Forced to Study Science	97
4. Education Just a Mean of Economic Prosperity	86
5. Victim of Domestic Violence	93

Source: Developed by authors

According to the table above, only 18% of female students choose the subjects (Science or Arts) in Matric. In contrast, this ratio increased to 37% in F.Sc. (Intermediate), 86% of the students are forced to study Science

subjects whereas 97% of the students have similar opinion, i.e., education is just a means to achieve economic prosperity, and 93% of the students are a victim of domestic violence. Findings reveal that females are taught to lead their lives according to the will of their parents and guardians from an early age. They do not have the right to choose the disciplines of their own choice. Females are encouraged to study science subjects, whereas Arts, including Social Sciences and Humanities, are discouraged in Pakistani society from an early age. Suppose a girl will not obey her parents. In that case, she must face domestic violence, reflecting how the concept of punishment is injected in minds from an early age to prohibit any kind of rebellion against social ideals.

Table 2: Opinion of the women enrolled in bachelors-M.Phil (Age: 18-25 Years)

Values	Responses in%
1. Independently chose Professional Degree Program	48
2. Freedom to Choose Career Path	46
3. Education for Economic Prosperity Only	87
4. Education in Helpful in Achieving Goals	36
5. Becoming what I aimed for	27
6. Right to Marriage	46
7. Victim of Domestic Violence	78
8. Reported Against Domestic Violence	0
9. Tried to Commit Suicide	84

Source: Developed by authors

Similar to Table 1, Table 2 illustrates that women are neither given the right to choose their professional degree programs nor career paths. Moreover, they will not be given the right to choose their life partners according to their choice. Their only objective from education is to maximize economic benefits. According to them, education is not contributing to achieving their desired goals in life. The majority of them are victims of domestic violence and have tried to commit suicide. No respondent dared to file a case against domestic violence. Hence, one can conclude from the above findings that education is not contributing to empowering women in Pakistan according to the very definition of empowerment.

Table 3: Opinion of women in early-mid career (Age: 25-40 Years)

Values	Responses in%
1. Chose Professional Degree Program Independently	43
2. Given the freedom to choose Career Path	49
3. Education for Economic Benefits Only	92
4. Attained Desired Goals through Education	47
5. Independent in Decision-Making	36
6. Has education Empowered you	45
7. Right to Marriage	34
8. Consent in Preparing Nikah Nama	1
9. Read Nikah Nama before Signing	0
10. Know your rights mentioned in Nikah Nama	2
12. Mental Compatibility with Husband	40
13. Satisfaction in Life	42
14. Victim of Domestic Violence	73
15. Tried to Commit Suicide	82
16. Filed Case Against Domestic Violence	2

Source: Developed by authors

Like the previous tables, the result in Table 3 reflects that most women have not done the professional degrees of their choice and have opted for professional careers against their will. For them, education was just a tool to maximize the economic benefits. They were not given the right to marry the person of their choice and remained

unable to develop good mental compatibility with their spouses. At the time of marriage, Nikah Nama (Marriage Contract) is not prepared with their consent. No respondent read Nikah Nama before signing it, and only 2% are aware of their rights mentioned in it. Women have no roles in decision-making in the personal and domestic spheres of life; they have less satisfaction in life. They are victims of domestic violence and never dared to file a report against it. Out of frustration, anxiety, and depression resulting from domestic violence, 82% of them tried to commit suicide.

## DISCUSSION

During the in-depth interviews, the opinion of women concerning women's empowerment in Pakistan is obtained in the following dimensions: domestic violence, suicide, and the problems encountered by educated women in the social sphere. The findings highlighted the following experiences, issues, and challenges faced by women:

### Education: Just a Means of Economic Prosperity

The first question posed to the interviewees was on the purpose of education in their lives. Most of the respondents stated that they were studying or have studied for the sake of a bright future. When they further inquired, they revealed that they mean economic prosperity by bright future. Education is one promising means to excel in life to generate money. Most of the respondents also acknowledged that quality education would help them find an economically strong life partner because most of the men of society want well-educated and professionally settled women. In Pakistan, 50% of female doctors do not carry on with their profession after marriage. Most females join medical colleges to marry rich men (BBC, 2015) after graduation because a doctor wife is considered a sign of social prestige in Pakistan, who does not practice and is kept inside the house for social show-off. One of the interviewees stated that:

*“DOCTOR IS LEAY BANI KU K DOCTOR LARKION KO RISHTAY ACHAY TAGRAY MIL JATE HAIN” (I became a doctor because doctors can quickly get married in financially strong families)*

Almost every respondent showed that financial gaps can be bridged through education, and financial strength is crucial to maintaining prestigious social status in Pakistan. One respondent stated that:

*“IZAT USI KI HAI JIS K PASS PAISA HAI” (Respectable is the one with money)*

Another respondent viewed that:

*“IZAT USI BAHU/BIWI KI HAI JO KAMA KAR LATI HO” (Respectable is the daughter-in-law or wife who brings money at home)*

As mentioned above, interviewees revealed that men want educated wives to compensate for their financial needs. A financially independent woman is preferred for marriage because she brings money at home. If an educated woman decides to be a housewife, she is mal-treated. As mentioned by a respondent:

*“GHARALU AURAT KI TU KOI IZAT HE NAHI HOTI” (Housewife has no social prestige as compared to working woman)*

### Social Pressures

The marriage of a female is considered a social taboo. Unmarried women are discouraged from discussing the matter of their marriages with parents or elders of the family. Women of Pakistani society have not been given a chance to choose love marriage. Parents arrange marriages, and the woman's consent to be married is not paid much attention. A respondent told:

*“BHAJI KEHTA THA, KISI LARKAY SE DOSTI KI TU TUKRAY KAR K KUTTON KO DAAL DUN GA” (My brother used to tell me, "Don't dare to befriend with any boy; otherwise, I will throw your chopped pieces before dogs)*



The sentence mentioned above is used to threaten the respondent. She should not indulge herself in anything considered socially prohibited, and she never dared to go against the social sanctions of society. Other opinions that come from interviewees on social barriers they faced were on the selection of professional degree programs and careers. Women are told to opt for professions that are socially accepted, one of the interviewees said:

“ABU KEHTAY HAIN, LARKION K LEAY IZZAT WALI NOKRI TU BUSS TEACHING AUR MEDICINE HE HAI”

(Father says, teaching and medicine are only respectable professions for women)

According to another respondent referring to her father’s statement:

“BETI, IZZAT TU SIRF DOCTORS KI HOTI HAI”

(Daughter, only doctors are respectable)

Religion is used as a tool to restrict women to certain professions such as teaching and medicine. A respondent referring to her early career days recollected and cited the statement of her father, when she wanted to be a banker but was forced to pursue teaching as a career:

“BETA, TALEEM O TADREES TU AUMBIA KARAM KA PAISHA HAI”

(Daughter, teaching is the profession of prophets)

Some professions are not liked or discouraged by society. Another respondent wanted to be a great philanthropist like Eidhi, but she was prohibited from joining any NGO by saying:

“NGO WALI AURAT TU AWARA HOTI HAI”

(Women working in NGOs are vagabond/shameless)

Like every underdeveloped and traditional society, Pakistan has a rigid social structure that differentiates humans on race, caste, color, creed, and economy. In a country where marriages are decided between the families and not individuals, women face troubles. According to a respondent:

“ITNA PARHA LIKHA K BHI MAA BAAP ASAY LARKI PESH KARTAY HAIN JAISAY KOI BIKAO MAL”

(Despite giving quality education to daughters, parents showcase them to families for marriage as if they are not humans but saleable commodities)

Marriage became a severe and troublesome matter for educated women in Pakistan. First, parents educate their daughters by spending heavy finances and later spending on dowry and other groom’s demands. The marriage of a daughter is not easy for parents. The culture of dowry still exists in every nook and corner of the country, and it is highly observable among the educated elite of the society. An interviewee brought more clarity by saying:

“LOG LARKI KI QUALIFICATION BAAD MAIN AUR ABBA KA RANK PEHLAY POUCHTAY HAIN”

(People first ask about my father’s rank, and second about girl’s qualification)

Despite good education and professional growth, women are chained in socially constructed cuff locks, and there is no solution to inhumane social norms and practices. A respondent showed her plight by adding:

“EDUCATION AUR ACHI NOKRI K BAWAJOOD ACHA RISHTA NAHI MILA KU K BAAP GAREEB THA”

(Despite having an education and a good job, I could not get a reasonable marriage proposal because my father was a poor man)

A respondent, an M.Phil. degree holder, and lecturer at a local university, highlighted the intensity of the problem by citing her personal experience said the words of her father:

“PARHAYA KU! AB ZAAT BARADARI MAIN RISHTA NAHI MILAY GA”

(We regret to educate our daughter, it is difficult to find a match for her in our race and caste)

### **Labyrinth of Social Ideals and Modern Approaches**

The women discussed confusion in opting for social ideals and a modern approach to society. Various questions were posed before the interviewees. On responding to a question, an interviewee, while explaining the current situation of the society, said that:

“LARKAY KO KATRINA KAIF AUR MAA KO RABIA BASRI CHAHEAY”

[A man demands Katrina Kaif (famous actress), and mother demands Rabia Basri (a pious saint)]

Generation gaps are highlighted in the above statement. The well-educated men prefer modern women in appearance and thoughts, yet obedient to husbands. On the other side, men's mothers demand women who play the traditional roles such as a good household manager, obedient to husband and in-laws. Most families in Pakistan have a joint family system where a woman must live with her in-laws. This confusion among the expectations and demands of society from women is troublesome and creates anxiety and depression. Traditional and underdeveloped societies like Pakistan cannot expect women to report any inhumane act against them. Society discouraged filing reports by women against any violence. It is a social taboo to discuss physical or mental abuse in public, and most women talk about it with hiccups and hesitation. A respondent said that:

“SAAS MARTI HAI, GHAR NAHI BATAYA KABHI, BAAP HEART PATIENT HAI”

(My mother-in-law beats me, but I never told my parents because my father is a heart patient)

Another respondent said that when I was done with my patience level, I decided to report to the police, at that point one of my friends advised me by saying:

“JO MAR PEET K KHILAF REPORT KARTA HAI, US KA HAAL MUKHTARAAN MAI YA QANDEEL  
BALOCH JAISA HOTA HA. YA NGOs CASH KARTI HAIN YA MARI JATI HAIN”

(Those who file a report against domestic violence ended up like Mukhtaraan Mai or Qandeel Baloch- either cashed by NGOs or killed by family)

Afterward, I never went to the police because she was so right in her approach. Our society has no solution to women's problems other than silence. An interviewee informed that her husband was involved in extramarital affairs, and she did not file a report or talk about it because:

“KAL KO MERE BETI SE KOI SHADI NAHI KARAY GA K BAAP CHARACTERLESS HAI, SAZA TU  
AURAT KO HE MILTI HAI, AAJ MUJHAY TO KAL KO MERE BETI”

(In the future, nobody will marry my daughter by saying that her father was a characterless person. Punishment is only for a woman; today, it's me, and tomorrow it will be my daughter)

Though parents arrange their daughters' marriages according to their wishes and will, without considering the girl's consent, they do not back their daughters if they fall in trouble like domestic violence. A young Pakistani woman refused to marry the man her family chose for her, a man who was also her cousin. Instead, she eloped with a man she chose for herself. She was three months pregnant when a group of 20 people beat her to death with bricks — the mob included her father, brothers, and the cousin she jilted (Selby, 2016). Most families have no cure or solution to the humiliation their daughters face, other than prescribing them to keep their mouths shut and bear everything with patience. A ubiquitous statement cited by many respondents is:

“WAPIS MUTT ANA, LOG KAHEN GAY YE TARBIAT KI HAI BETI KI JO GHAR NAHI BASA SAKI”

(Don't come back; otherwise, people would question our brought-up that we failed to teach you the skills to sustain streamlined married life)

Another respondent stated her father's words when she went to her father to tell him about her terrible condition:

“BAAP KO JA K ZAKHM DEKHAY TU UNHO NE KAHA, ME KHUSH TU K TUM MOHTAJ NAHI HO BUS  
SABAR SE APNA TIME PURA KARO”

(I showed scars and wounds to my father, he said, I am satisfied that you are not financially dependent, pass your time with patience)

Many parents feel free from any liability in case the marriage of their daughter fails. They neither consider nor admit the flaws in their decision-making while deciding the marriage of their daughter without her consent, and once it fails, they label it as “fate.” A respondent said that after marriage, “I realized why people of our society are scared of the birth of a female child.” We learned in childhood that we are not scared of our daughter but her fate. She added that:

“BETI KI PADAISH PAY MATAM JAIZ HAI”  
(Mourning on the birth of a daughter is justified)

Another respondent, telling about her experiences, said that:

“AURAT HONA GUNNAH HAI, DUA KARTI HUN RUB MUJHAY BETI NA DE”  
(Being a woman is a sin, I pray not to have a daughter)

Women have no haven in society. Usually, they are neither acceptable to their parents after marriage nor treated well by in-laws. A respondent revealed the statement of her mother when she revealed about her decision to separate from her husband; her mother said that:

“BHAI K BARTAN DHONAY SE BEHTAR HAI SHOHAR SE MAAR KHA LO”  
(Physical abuse by husband is better than washing dishes at brother’s house)

Single women have too little good social status that it is challenging to survive. They are usually faced with blaming and criticism regarding their moral characters. In this situation, they cannot live alone after getting a divorce. The only option remaining is to stay quiet and face domestic violence patiently or release themselves from all worries by committing suicide. Hence, the ratio of suicide has increased significantly since the last decade.

### **Suicide**

Complaining against domestic violence in the police is not an option for women in Pakistan because reporting domestic crimes is socially discouraged. People hesitate to discuss their family issues in public, and particularly abuse against women is a common social phenomenon in Pakistan that is considered acceptable and normal by a significant part of the society. According to social expectations, it is alright if a woman is beaten by her male (father, brother, and husband) family members. A respondent narrated the story of her cousin, who wanted to be a model and was frequently beaten by her father and brothers. Later, her father decided to get her to marry a man who was twice her age. She was helpless and ended up committing suicide. Another respondent told about her sister; she has done love marriage and was leading a happy married life, her in-laws were caring, but my parents stopped meeting her. My father tabled a false kidnapping case against her husband, and she was highly upset about my father’s actions. She was very close to our father before marriage, and after marriage, she tried to reconnect with us but failed. The last time when she talked to our father on the phone, the father became harsh, and:

“DADDY NE KAHA, K MAR GAE HU TUM HUMARAY LEAY AUR WO WAQAE E MAR GAE”  
(Daddy said, you are dead for us, and she killed herself)

Another respondent told the story of her sister-in-law, who committed suicide: other than her economic background, she was better than me in looks, education, and moral values. She was a practicing doctor yet badly abused by our mother-in-law. Our mother-in-law never dared to touch me as she was very well known of the fact that my parents had doomed her if she misbehaves but in the case of my late sister-in-law who was from a poor background, she crossed all the limits and as a consequence:

“NA SUSRAAL REH SAKTI THE NA WAPIS JA SAKTI THE TU ZEHAAR PE MAR GAE” (She was neither able to stay with in-laws nor go back, hence committed suicide)

### **CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD**

In the last two decades, Pakistan made discernible investments to empower women. On one side, the female literacy rate is improving in rural areas due to free education programs by the government. In contrast, on the other side, well-educated urban women are portraying the accurate picture of women’s empowerment by contributing to

all walks of life. Parallel to that positive societal transformation, a significant rise in domestic violence and suicide rates among women is observed. This ratio is more in urban and educated women than rural women. Pakistan is an underdeveloped country. Its society is based on traditional ideals, yet it has adopted modern development approaches, including empowering women through education. For it, women empowerment means women with modern education and ideas while embracing their traditional roles and status, satisfying the traditional ideals as per the very expectations of the society. Education liberates women and gives them the courage to stand out for their rights, which is against the traditional ideals of Pakistani society. Pakistani society gives women the status of the second gender, which means a submissive or a subordinate of male members of the society. Women, despite higher education, are maltreated. They have no right to make crucial decisions of their life, such as selecting professional degree programs, career paths, and partners for marriage, etc. Education benefits them in the economic domain, but unfortunately, financial stability does not improve their social condition and status. It remained unsuccessful in empowering women in Pakistan, reflected in reports concerning domestic violence and suicide; most females are victims of domestic violence and do not dare to complain against the offenders. Even if a woman shows courage to stand against inhumane acts like sexual harassment or domestic violence, society strongly discourages it. Out of anxiety, depression, and a state of helplessness, they find suicide an ultimate solution to all their worries, troubles, and problems. State of confusion created by society in the struggle of traditional ideals and modern approaches simultaneously, parallel to each other, is a practically unachievable objective. It has developed a social disorder, which will lead to serious trouble in the next decade if not controlled. A society with a rigid and static social order cannot stay stable for an extended period. Hence, it is essential to transform the traditional ideals in commensuration with changing and developing modernization patterns. Educated women of Pakistan may be free to think but not to act. Government must take initiatives to bridge the gaps to empower women in a true sense. Civil society and NGOs must also start a campaign in which informal education is used to transform the opinion and perception of the society on the social status and roles of women in Pakistan. By changing perceptions, we can transform behaviors and actions eventually. Women are called the “Social Fathers,” if they continue to suffer, it will bring catastrophic effects to the very fabric of the society.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

The instant study was conducted in Pakistani society; hence, the findings may be generalized with utmost care in other socio-cultural settings. Future researchers may conduct similar studies with a more extensive and more diversified sample from all over Pakistan. Further, in-depth interviews with experts, especially social psychologists, may also be conducted to unfold various perspectives towards the research phenomenon.

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