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ORIGINAL PAPER

"As one grows older, the hidden meaning and importance of being a practicing Shia becomes clearer": voices of Shia women married to Sunni men

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Abstract

Intersectarian marriages in Islam have been an area of interest, but with very little empirical research. Scholarship suggests that Muslim Shia women believe that intersectarian marriages with Sunni men would have negative consequences on their wellbeing, overall family quality of life, and create tension for any children born (Cappucci in J Muslim Minor Aff 36(4):561–568, 2016). Through qualitative interviews with Pakistani Shia women, who chose to marry Sunni men for love and now have children from the marriage, this study aims to understand participant feelings and experiences pre and post marriage. The study identifies six themes pre-marriage and another six themes post-marriage which are more dire and a cause of concern, including: (i) Never-ending shaming by relatives and in-laws taking a toll over time; (ii) Differences in legal issues, prayers, and rituals creating difficulties after a few years of marriage; (iii) Children following the beliefs of the father causing great pain to mother; (iv) Feelings of immense guilt for abandoning the Shia faith; (v) Turning to lies and hiding information from spouse; and (vi) Fear for Afterlife. The paper concludes with a discussion and recommendation for improved support of women in intersectarian marriages related to counseling and legal reform.

Keywords Shia women · Love marriages · Intersectarian marriages · Sunni · Life quality · Afterlife

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Introduction

Global literature suggests that married couples who follow the same religious and sectarian beliefs, have less conflict and more commitment to marriage (Goodman et al. 2013; Immanuel et al. 2017; Hwang et al. 2019). An intersectarian marriage refers to the union between people who belong to the same domain religion (e.g. Islam) but have different sectarian identities (e.g. Shia versus Sunni sects) (Raab and Holligan 2012). In Western countries where religious differences are not as prominent, intersectarian marriages have seen a rise due to declining differences in social and economic status (Bumpass 1970). However, scholarship suggests that intersectarian marriages may have negative consequences on family life and individual family member's wellbeing (Blau et al. 1984). This is because differences in religion can lead to dissimilarities in values and communication styles, which can result in greater chance of marital conflict and even divorce (Kalmijn et al. 2005). Literature also suggests that the longer the marriage lasts, the greater the possibility of marital conflict arising due to sectarian differences and increased adoption of religious practices in later life (Tuttle and Davis 2015).

Intersectarian marriages in Islam, a religion of over 70 sects, has been an area of interest, but with very little empirical research to be found (Shanneik 2017). With a population of approximately 2 billion people across the world, the two predominant sects of Islam are the Shias and Sunnis (Bennett-Jones 2022). Both the Shia and Sunni sects believe in the main five pillars of Islam- declaring monotheistic faith in one God (Allah) and believing that Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) is the last messenger; conducting daily prayers; giving charity or religious taxes to the poor; fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; and performing Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca city (Abdo 2017). However, they differ significantly in that Sunnis believe that the Quran and the traditions (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) are enough; whereas the Shias believe that the custodians of the interpretation of the Quran and authentic *Sunnah* are the family of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), also known as the *AhlulBait* (including Hazrat Imam Ali, Hazrat Fatima, Hazrat Imam Hassan, and Hazrat Imam Hussain- peace be upon them) (Moore 2015). This study focuses on interviewing Shia women in love marriages with Sunni men and understanding their experiences and challenges, to add to the sociology of marriage literature and advise improved support for women in intersect marriages.

Literature review

Inter-marriages within Shia and Sunni sects are not unheard of, though some sectarian clerks and families prohibit it all together (Alatas 2022). In most circumstances intersectarian unions between Shias and Sunnis happen as a consequence of love, and parents rarely arrange such a match for their children (Alghafli et al. 2014; Cheema 2014). There are significant social and community-level issues involved in Shia-Sunni intersectarian marriages,

such as resistance and estrangement by families, and shaming by relatives and friends (Perazzo 2012; Alatas 2022). Furthermore, there can be legal issues that may affect the couple later on during their marital life (Khuri 1987), such as differences in laws for dissolution of marriage, inheritance, fostering and adoption, and interpretation of Quran and Prophetic traditions for family-life and child socialization (Bani and Pate 2015; Sabaruddin and Rasyid 2023). Some research reports that Muslim women, regardless of their sect, face more pressure, and even some form of abuse to change their religious views and practices post marriage, resulting in very few Muslim women opting for intersectarian marriages (Research Directorate 2005).

Other scholarship suggests that Shia women are reluctant to marry Sunni men as they believe it would: (i) compromise their health and wellbeing in the future, (ii) Sunni men would not have the same feelings of love and loyalty to the Prophetic household, (iii) there would be sectarian tension which would negatively affect any children born, and (iv) the family would not support them resulting in ostracization from their significant others (Cappucci 2016). This is why with intersectarian and other mixed marriages the role of counselors and social work professionals is immense in providing support for bridging differences in beliefs and religious politics (Donnan 1990). It is also true that though marriage is considered a private relationship between two individuals, eventually the views and interaction of relatives and friends influence marital relationship, and thus counseling is needed to manage possible conflict arising from the public domain. Evidence confirms that the role of in-laws and living in joint families influences marital conflict (Bryant et al. 2001)

Local literature has found that intersectarian marriages between Shias and Sunnis may encourage acceptance and tolerance (Shafi and Faheem 2022). However, the same study also suggests that if social capital, such as quality of connection, trust, and network with family and friends, is affected negatively due to intersectarian marriage, it can also affect the marital relationship. In most cases Shia women are expected to convert to Sunni Islam upon intersectarian marriage given the patriarchal climate of Pakistan, and in some cases Sunni men are encouraged make Shia women fall in love with them, so they can marry and convert them to Sunni faith and earn rewards in the afterlife (Marsden 2007). Overall, marriage in Islam and Pakistan is an alliance between families which is arranged by the male patriarchs (Samad 1998). Marital alliances in the country are not just approved within religious sect, but also within caste and to match social status and wealth backgrounds (Wright Jr, 1994). It is thus that intersectarian love marriages in Pakistan face considerable challenges, not just because of the religious differences, but because the decision was made without the permission of male patriarchs and family elders. Though Muslim women face considerable backlash from family and society for opting for a love marriage outside their sect (Samad 1998), research suggests that Shia women comparatively suffer even more severe backlash from families as they are regarded as abandoning the Prophetic household (Sultan et al. 2020).

Theoretical framework

Theories of marriage predominantly argue that marriage is a decision based on perceived gains of marital union over remaining single (Becker 1974). Becker argues that people will decide to marry based on "marriage market" similarities such as physical capital, education, intelligence, height, and racial and religious background. Attachment theory, in context to marriage, suggests that adult attachments and marital unions require mutual care (Zeifman and Hazan 2008). Over time, the initial feelings of love and romance may not be enough to sustain the relationship, as religious beliefs assume importance with changes over the life course. With mothers especially, who have the primary responsibility for care provision and transmission of values and morals to children, the role of religion and observance of religious rituals becomes significant.

Other theorists add here that when women have similar religious beliefs and receive support from their spouse for religious commitment (Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008) and religious coping (Krumrei et al. 2011) it has a positive effect on the quality of their marital relationships and their mental health. The similarity in religious commitment and beliefs of married couples also helps to develop a secure attachment and build self-esteem for couples (Lakatos and Martos 2019). A theoretical framework for a lasting marriage has been proposed by Mullins, who argues that common prayer, worship, and rituals are leading factors contributing to longevity in marriage and the perception in couples of their marriage union being sacred and blessed (Mullins 2016).

Theorists also shed light on the macro aspect of marriage, whereby marital union of two individuals is symbolic of an exchange and commitment of the larger community, involving family and society (Reid 2008). An example of this is that no matter how secular the state, or how committed the married couple is to ignoring differences in religious beliefs, eventually laws and policies related to marriage and family may influence the quality of the union (Berman 1974). In the West, religious beliefs about same-sex unions and family planning may be deep-seated and emerge to affect the marital relationship. In a similar manner, in intersect marriages between Shias and Sunnis laws for temporary marriages (Mandal 2015) and permission for IVF treatment are (Inhorn 2006a, b) examples for when laws and policies can impact marital union and harmony. Ultimately, research about interreligious or intersectarian marriages are needed to understand how the marriage union is impacted over time and if religious differences emerge to create challenges.

Statement of the problem

Pakistan stands at a population of 242 million people, with the Shia and Sunni populations estimated to be above 46 million and 186 million, respectively (Office of International Religious Freedom 2023). Research on the sociology of the family and intersectarian marriages is almost non-existent in the country (Ghaus et al. 2021). This is mainly because the family unit and religious belief systems are

considered to be a private domain (Habiba et al. 2016). Adding to the complication is that Pakistan does not have a comprehensive family-level database with records for intersectarian marriages (Kalin and Siddiqui 2014), which makes it problematic to identify such families, collect nation-wide data randomly about the challenges they may face, or develop recommendations for protective policy (Jafree 2023). There is need to identify the problems and challenges facing women in intersectarian marriages, so that relevant policy and community support can be advised and developed.

Aims of the study

The aim of this study is to interview Shia women in love marriages with Sunni men and to understand their experiences pre and post marriage. To the best of researcher knowledge, this is the first study attempting to understand intersectarian marriages and challenges perceived by Pakistani Shia women. As seen above, very little scholarship can be found in this area. The study chooses to have a gender-focus, mainly because of the researcher background in gender-based research and the particular concern that women may face more health and life consequences of intersectarian marriages, as discussed above. The study will be important in identifying any challenges faced by Shia women in intersectarian marriages, and advising improved support for women in intersectarian marriages, under areas of family-level policies, legal polices, community social worker support, and counseling.

Methods

Research design

This study has a qualitative research design and uses an open-ended questionnaire to collect data.

Ethics and permissions

This research is part of a wider study to understand the challenges facing the Shia community of Pakistan, of which four studies have been published (Jafree et al. 2023; Sara Rizvi Jafree 2020; 2022; Sara Rizvi Jafree et al. 2023). The study has received ethics clearance from the (Blinded for review). Informed consent was taken from participants and no confidential information has been shared. Participants were free to exit the interview at any point and no incentives were provided for participation.

Sample

Based on contacts through previous research, this study has adopted a snowball sampling technique to qualitatively interview Shia women of the following

selection criterion: (i) who had a love marriage with a Sunni man, (ii) who have children from the marriage, and (iii) who have every intent to remain in the marriage and still have feelings of love for their spouse. Though fifteen women were requested to participate in the study, a final nine agreed to meet online for the interviews. Women who did not want to participate in the study, mentioned that, despite assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, they were not comfortable talking about their marriage or family. The nine participants all had a minimum Undergraduate degree, and five were working whereas four were stay-at-home wives. The ages of the participants were between 29 to 54 years, and each had two or more children. The length of marriage of participants was between eight years to twenty years. All women belonged to large urban cities of Pakistan-Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad.

Data collection

The data was collected on the telephone to facilitate participants and researcher in not having to travel or arrange for a confidential setting, and to secure coronavirus pandemic social distancing between January 2022 to March 2022. Participants were asked for permission for audio recording during the telephone call to prevent loss of data. Each call lasted 30-55 minutes and all participant concluded the interview during one call and there were no follow-up calls. However, WhatsApp contact was maintained so the researcher could share final themes with participants to confirm results.

Instrument

The semi-structured questions were prepared to gain an insider's perceptive to the following broad areas pertaining to sectarian differences (Appendix): (a) What was the response of family when news was shared about the desire to wed a Sunni man, (b) What internal questions and thoughts or fears, if any, did women have pre-marriage, (c) If differences in sectarian beliefs make a difference after marriage takes place and in what ways, (b) If sectarian differences influence choices in child upbringing, (c) What is the kind of social support gained from families, in-laws, and friends after marriage, (d) Is there any pressure on women to change sectarian views and practices, (e) Are there any concerns for the future with regard to religious beliefs and practices.

Data analysis

The data has been analyzed through thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012), with themes being coded under the two areas of (i) feelings and concerns pre-marriage, and (ii) experiences and challenges post-marriage. To ensure reliability and trustworthiness of date (Elo et al. 2014), the final themes have been shared with participants and also two non-participants.

Results

Six themes each were discovered regarding pre-marriage experiences and post-marriage experiences, respectively, summarized in Table 1.

Pre-marriage experiences

Resistance from family members which were dismissed, but not forgotten

All participants agreed that many people from their own family or their spouse's family opposed the marriage when they heard about it. Interestingly, these people were described as not just parents, or the more conservative family members, but also family members who by nature were troublemakers and judgmental. Woman confirmed that the feelings of love and wish to get married were predominant over all other feelings, but that the resistance from relatives was not forgotten and that upon recollection it was a cause of great worry and anxiety for them. As family and relatives played such a big role in the lives of people in Pakistan, their reactions and involvement in creating difficulties was a cause of concern for the mental health of women and the level of toxicity that remained in the homes.

A woman from a Syed family shared the disapproval from parents:

> My parents refused outright, because I am also a *Syed* (descendant of Hazrat Muhammad- peace be upon him). I remained in shock, because I understood what they were saying, but at the same time, I believe that Islam does not promote caste-based divisions. My husband after all, is a better human being than so many others *Syeds* I know. I convinced my parents by giving the example of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), getting his cousin married to a non-*Syed* and clearly stating that if not marriage with *Bilal*

Table 1 Summary themes of study (N = 09)

	f
Pre-marriage experiences	
Resistance from family members which were dismissed, but not forgotten	09
Overwhelmed with love and wanting to get married before things change	08
Discussions with spouse about implications of their intersect marriage	08
Good personality of Sunni man outranks sectarian affiliation	05
Social disadvantages compelled women for love marriage with Sunni	05
Prior experiences of non-conformity to traditional order	03
Post-marriage experiences	
Never-ending shaming by relatives and in-laws take a toll over time	08
Children follow the beliefs of the father and ignore Shia faith	07
Differences in legal issues, prayers, and rituals start to matter with time	07
Guilt for abandoning the Shia faith	05
Instilling Shia values without the husband's knowledge	04
Fear for afterlife	04

> (husbands name), then I would remain unmarried forever. However, this is something that remains in my heart forever and I worry about what my parents warned me regarding Syeds not taking *sadqah* (charity) from non-Syeds and thus a marriage between the two not being *halal* (legal or acceptable).

Another woman shared about the disapproval of close relatives and the pain that it caused:

> There was a straight NO from my mother's relatives, including my *Mamu* (mothers' brother), who had brought me up after my father died. I wanted to leave his house and not be dependent on him anymore. My mother was happy I was getting married, though a bit disappointed it was to a Sunni man. But the disapproval of my *Mamu* was extremely painful for the both of us. In many ways, I feel that I should not have repaid him like this for all that he did for me. But like I said, it was also important for me to get married to a person I loved and to leave his house and not remain dependent on him. After my father's death and all the pain and deprivation I suffered, I deserved a love marriage.

Another participant described resistance caused by troublemakers in the family:

> My uncle in-law showed resistance from day one- and even now after 15 years of marriage he creates trouble and wastes no opportunity to humiliate me. Initially, he came and forbade my father-in-law for the marriage, and brought a Sunni *Alim* (scholar) to convince my father-in-law. The Alim stated that he will not perform our *Nikah* (wedding contract), as Shias are not Muslims. My husband and I were terrified that my father-in-law will refuse, and it was a time of great distress. To date the same uncle-in-law will come to our house and make a pleasant gathering into a sectarian issue. He will ask me about why Shias say their prayers differently, and why the Shia *Azaan* (call for prayer) is different… he only does it to create trouble and make life difficult for others. When the truth is the actions of *Namaz* (prayer) or the words of *Azaan* make no difference to your level of piety and Allah's acceptance. I hate to say this, but I wait for the day to hear about this man disappearing from our world and never visiting our home. As you know relatives have so much influence in our lives and we must spend half our lives with them.

Overwhelmed with love and wanting to get married before things change

Most of the participants discussed the feelings of blind and overwhelming love they felt for their current spouse. The feelings of love had greater desperation and anxiety attached to it due to the sectarian differences, and thus women were eager to get married as soon as possible, as they felt there would be less risk of them being separated from their love post the sacred institution of marriage in a conservative society like Pakistan.

In the planning of the wedding, many women mentioned that it took place in a rush and with many family members who disapproved not being present. Because of not attending the marriage and giving initial approval, the relationship had a long-term or permanent impact on the level of estrangement. One of the participants mentioned:

> Neither my father nor brother participated in my wedding. I did not meet them for like 15–16 years afterwards as it was a shock and extremely upsetting that they were not there for the most important day of my life. I did not pay a visit to my maternal home, and they did not visit me either. After 16 years of my marriage and the loss of my father, my brothers began to talk to me, but they never give me the same importance as they give to my other sisters.

Discussions with spouse about implications of their intersect marriage

Most of the participants shared that they had not entered the marriage without talking to their partners about their sectarian differences. Different participants had mutually agreed with their spouse about three different pathways for their life ahead. Some agreed that there was no difference between Sunni and Shias and that this was their fundamental ideology. One participant described:

> We were very clear that a Sunni is someone who follows the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) *Sunnah* (sayings and teachings), and a Shia is one who follows the *Ahlebait* or Prophet Muhammad's family (peace be upon them). You cannot be a *Momin* (true practicing Muslim) unless you are both a Sunni and a Shia. Simple as that. The difference is political and has no impact on our lives thankfully. Wherever we see people or family members stressing on differences we stay away from them and keep our children away too.

Other partners had agreed not to interfere with each other's religious beliefs or practice of rituals or let sectarian differences affect their lives and happiness. One woman shared:

> We agreed very early on that it doesn't matter which sect the other belongs to and that we would never impose on each other's beliefs and practices or try to control each other.

A third group of women agreed to convert to Sunni Islam or at least overtly convert to ensure that their children did not suffer from conflict and uncertainty, and to ensure that the family of their husband did not have the opportunity to create trouble. One woman who converted overtly to Sunni Islam shared:

> I knew the problems and consequences I would have faced if I became aggressive or open about my Shia beliefs. I loved my husband, and this was a concession I was willing to make for the peace of my house and to please my husband. From the day of my marriage, I declared to his family and relatives that I was a Sunni. Of course, aren't we all? We Shias also follow the

> Sunnah. I never bothered my husband and never forced my children to opt for the Shia sect. My children are Sunnis, and they perform religious obligations, such as *Namaz* (prayer) and *Roza* (fasting) according to Sunni guidelines.

Good personality of Sunni man outranks sectarian affiliation

The deciding factor to resist all opposition for the love marriage for most of the women participants was the personality of their spouse. Participants shared that their respective husbands had good manners and decent personalities, and that they associated trust, acceptance, and sincerity with them. Some mentioned not seeing any 'red flags' apart from the sectarian issue, and that if even one red flag had existed in association with the Sunni factor and sectarian differences, they would not have gone ahead with the marriage. One woman shared:

> I told my parents clearly to ignore the caste and religious belief and assess my husband based on his personality. My husband took my parents for dinner a few times and invited them to visit his family and workplace. My father and brother took this even further by talking to his coworkers and finding friends and extended relatives and asking them to share something bad about my husband. No one had anything bad to say about him and instead everyone praised him for his honesty and sincerity. And so really the personality factor defeated any fight left in my parents.

Social disadvantages compelled women for love marriage with Sunni

Many participants shared that their love marriage was compelled by social circumstances of loss and disadvantaged circumstances. Two women participants had lost their father's when they had been teenagers and another's father had been terminally ill when she had fallen in love. A fourth had been desperate to get married as her younger sister was already married and there was great family and social stigma attached to her single status, with fear that she may never gain an arranged marriage proposal as families would wonder why her younger sister was married before her. A fifth participant had married a Shia man but had been divorced within three months and a sixth had been engaged for six years to her cousin who had then proceeded to marry his coworker. Two women had crossed the age of thirty years and were eager to get married and have children before it was too late, as they had been conditioned to believe that women must marry in their twenties and have children as early as possible to avoid fertility issues. A ninth participant shared that the loss of her mother and difficult life with her stepmother and stepsiblings promoted her to opt for a quick love marriage with a Sunni:

> I was very young when my mother died, after some time my leg broke and had to be cut. I manage with a prosthetic leg now. My father married again and though my stepmother is not an evil person, she has overall ignored me. Some of this might be due to my leg and fear that I would become a burden on her with time. She had four children soon after marriage and has always been

busy with them. My father has always been in love with my stepmother and treated me like he is ashamed of me. When I turned 18 years, I realized that he wanted me to get married and leave the house. When a Sunni man proposed to me, it was the best thing that happened to me. Finally, a man loved me and appreciated me. This was something even my father did not give me. I think I got married both because of gratitude and so I could escape my home and father.

Prior experiences of non-conformity to traditional order

A few women mentioned that compared to the typical Pakistani female, they had been rebellious in meeting the typical standards of passivity and conformity. One participant shared that her living in a hostel in another city while studying at university was uncommon 18 years ago and many people from her relatives and community stigmatized and shamed her parents for allowing this. It was thus that getting married to a Sunni man was not the only rebellion in her life. Another mentioned that using public transport and travelling without male guardians was a taboo in her family, but that she had been bold and regularly travelled in a rikshaw alone to attend her college. A third participant mentioned that she had resisted her whole family over a period of three years without faltering even once when she had been pressurized to marry her cousin, who used to smoke and was jobless. In this way, these women were already used to family disapproval and resisting the traditional order, so it became easier for them to fight their families for a love marriage to a Sunni man. One woman shared:

I remember my family saying the marriage will not last long. This immediately put me on the defensive. This is exactly what they had said about me living in dorm and not being able to finish my degree with full honors as I would be distracted by friends and campus life. I immediately went into action- my parents never refused my elder brother and he had been the one to convince them (parents) about my living in dorm independently. He (brother) helped to convince my mother that we will use Shia rituals in the marriage ceremony and a Shia *Molvi* (religious scholar who officiates the marriage ceremony).

Post-marriage experiences

Never-ending shaming by relatives and in-laws take a toll over time

Most participants confirmed that though the warnings were there before marriage about facing criticism and shaming for being Shias, after so many years the constant onslaught from relative and in-laws had taken its toll. Participants faced special challenges when living in joint families, when in-laws visited and on occasions such as *Eidh*, weddings, and funerals. The main ways of shaming women included referring to Shias as Kafirs, calling their practices and rituals un-Islamic, not letting

husband attending functions hosted by Shia family members, and pressurizing the husband to not be lenient with wife in visiting family. One woman shared how her in-laws regularly berate the Shia community and have caused her pain and shame for many years now:

> I live in a joint family and my in-laws regularly direct family conversations to religious beliefs. They liken Shias to Hindus and claim that Shias worship the horse. This has been going on for twelve years now- since the day I got married. I try my best not to hurt the feeling of my husband by avoiding quarreling or talking back to my in-laws, but this is what fuels my in-laws to continue with their shaming and criticism. Though I don't say anything to my husband, my in-laws have brought so much toxicity in my life and home. I hate them for this. Their reasons have little do with religion, and more to do with the attempt to lower mine and my family's status in the eyes of my husband.

Another woman shared how difficult it was to attend occasions hosted by her family, where her in-laws were also invited and that post the event, she faced shaming and criticism:

> In 15 years of marriage there have been weddings and funerals in my family that my mother-in-law and sisters-in-laws have attended. Each occasion has been used as an opportunity to criticize my family and Shia rituals. In the initial years it didn't matter. Maybe because I was so deeply in love with my husband, and I didn't notice these things, or I believed that they would eventually stop as people got used to our marriage. But now everything starts hitting me more acutely…the snide comments, the secret conversations with my husband, the looks which suggest we (Shias) belong to a cult, and the seemingly innocent questions about how Shia practices resemble Hindu practices.

Another woman shared how living with a Sunni sister-in-law in a joint family was always a cause of pain and exclusion for her:

> My husband's brother's wife- my sister-in-law- is a Sunni…and the queen of the house. She was married before me and has everyone completely under her control. My in-laws prefer her to me, and this is obvious to everyone, even the servants. She is the insider, and I am the outsider. And it will always remain like this. I used to be hurt initially and try to make my place and win my in-laws over, but now I have given up.

One participant shared the consistent pressure of her in-laws on her husband from becoming lenient with her:

> There is constant shaming of me, my family and generally the Shia beliefs by my in-laws. They do this so that my husband never becomes lenient with me and so his heart does not soften towards Shia beliefs or my aging parents. For example, they did not let my husband attend my *Tayas* (fathers' elder brother) burial as they convinced him that the Shia burial rites and the funeral prayer

are not Islamic. This has been a cause of great pain to my family, and it is the biggest insult for my father.

Children follow the beliefs of the father and ignore Shia faith

Most women participants shared that before marriage there was less realization or understanding about the importance of religious beliefs of future children. Participants also confirmed that when children were young there were less feelings of anxiety or concern. However, as their children grew up and Islamic law mandated them to start saying their prayers and to fast, issues began to arise. Women from joint families shared that they faced a lot of issues in decisions related to selection of a Sunni *Qari* (teacher for reciting Quran), use of Quranic translation by a Sunni scholar, and overall vigilance that children should not be taken for Shia rituals such as Majlis[1], Niaz[2], or Koonday.[3] Most participants with children above the age of 12 years confirmed that their children were eager to please their father and his family by following the Sunni tradition, which was a source of immense pain for women. One woman shared:

> There was never any opportunity to bring up counter evidence or share the Shia traditions and law. All three of my kids avoid conflicting opinions with their father and *Dadiyal* (fathers' family). They have chosen Sunnism. This causes me so much grief and pain.

Another woman shared that children preferred to please the father, as they lived in his house and that generally mothers had a lower status which influenced the choice of sectarian beliefs in children:

> It is true that I never imposed by sectarian beliefs on my children. I live in my husband's home, and I don't want to rock the boat. I want peace and harmony. But my children have also never tried to understand or recognize Shia beliefs. They ignore this part of my existence. Our elders were right, a woman can never influence her children's values or beliefs. Children will always follow their father, as they see their strength and stability in him.

One woman shared that she was not allowed to keep her pledge and had to forsake a Shia name for her son, and that this caused her great fear and anxiety, as she believed the breaking of her oath was the cause of illness in her son:

[1]Sacred religious ceremony arranged by Shia Muslims to commemorate the family of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who were martyred in Kerbala.

[2]Preparation of food to distribute to the family or the poor in the name of deceased family members or the *Ahlebait*. Many Sunnis believe this to be un-Islamic.

[3]*Koonday* is food prepared by Shias or devotees of the *Ahlebait* in the month of Rajab. The meal is served in the honor of the teachings and miracles associated with Imam Jaffar -e-Sadiq- the grand-son of Prophet Muhammad (peace e upon him).

> I had a difficult pregnancy and made a *Mannat*[4] that if I deliver safely, I will name my son 'Hasnain'.[5] However, as soon as my son was born, he was named 'Muhammad' by his *Dada* (paternal grandfather). I was criticized severely for even suggesting that Hasnain was a better name than the Prophets. I was not even allowed to keep it as a middle name. Even now after 17 years when my son falls sick, I am scared that it is because of my unfulfilled *Mannat.*

Differences in legal issues, prayers, and rituals start to matter with time

Women participants shared how with the passing of time issues have emerged which they were not aware of before marriage or else they did not pay heed to. The main concerns discussed by participants included issues related to property, inheritance, reading of supplementary prayers not from the Quran, and attending of *Majlis*. This was an evolving concern for women, and they feared what other issues might arise in coming years. One woman shared her concerns about the difference in inheritance laws in the Shia and Sunni faith and the consequent impact on her and her daughters:

> In the Shia faith we believe that daughters inherit equally, and that fathers, husbands and other male guardians can gift whatever they please to their female family members in their lifetime. However, Sunni law differs and there is a lower allocation for daughters and widows. I have two daughters and a son. My father gave one house each to me and my brother and he dealt with us equally. I worry that my son will be left with more than my daughters. But I don't know what to do about this as Sunnis believe they are following Quranic law, whereas it is a case of difference in interpretation. God does not differ between males and females.

Another woman shared the complexity of becoming more religious and spiritual with age and developing meaning in life through observance of prayer and other forms of worship:

> I never neglected my prayers even before marriage, nor missed a fast. I read *Siparas* (chapters of the Quran) regularly. But now I realise that just the Quran and the fast and the prayer are not enough.
>
> Life eventually compels you to turn to the riches offered by the *Ahlebait.* Whether it was my mother's illness, a difficult pregnancy, or the loss of my

[4]A *Mannat* is a wish that one desires to come to fruition, and it may also refer to the vow one makes and fulfils to God or a religious saint.

[5]Hasnain is a common Shia name that merges the names of Hassan and Hussain- the sons of Hazrat Fatima and grandsons of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them).

husband's job, I am now dependent on reading supplementary prayers like the Hadis e Kissa[6], Dua e Mashlool[7], and Dua e Kumail.[8]

Similarly, the importance of dates was not something that mattered. My parents used to use a Shia Jantri[9] to guide them about selecting dates for marriages and other important events. For me before only *Ashura* (10th Muharram) held meaning. I laugh at myself sometimes and how I used to be. I now realize the importance of other days such as Ayyam e Fatima[10], Chehlum[11], the birth dates and death anniversaries of the 14 *Masomeen* (Infallibles).[12]

One woman shared that before marriage attending Majlis was not so important, but now it had become essential for her:

You know when one is young, Majlis and being a Shia is taken for granted. In fact, the younger you are the less you can explain or understand its significance. As one grows older, the hidden meaning and importance of being a practicing Shia becomes clearer. It is a sacred promise to Hazrat Fatima (peace be upon her), that we will not forget what happened to her sons. If we give up the ritual and practice of attending, we will forget Islamic history and the difference between right and wrong. It is as simple as this.

My mother used to say "you cannot compare a person who attends Majlis and is a follower of Hazrat Fatima (peace be upon her), with other Muslims. It is not the same thing." Finally, I have realized what my mother meant.

Guilt for abandoning the Shia faith

Some women participants were not afraid to share that they felt immense guilt in marrying a Sunni. The happier they were in their lives, the more guilt they felt.

[6]The Tradition of the Cloak, or Hadith al-Kisa', is a narrative of an incident where the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) assembled Hassan, Husayn, Ali, and Fatima (peace be upon them) under his cloak. Followers of the school of *Ahlebiat* customarily hold meetings in which this tradition is recited.

[7]This prayer is known as "supplication of the youth stricken for his sin," is quoted from the work of Kafami and from Muhaj al Da-wat by Sayyid ibn Tawus.

[8]Dua e Kumail is a prayer recited for "protecting against the evil of enemies, for opening the gate of one's daily bread, and for the forgiveness of sins" and is quoted from Kumayl Ibn Ziyad Nakha'i a companion of Hazrat Ali (peace be upon him).

[9]A Shia Jantri includes the annual dates based on the Islamic calendar for good and bad days, to help the Shia community plan their annual activities.

[10]The days commemorating the martyrdom of Hazrat Fatima Zahra (peace be upon her), the beloved daughter of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) are known as 'Ayyam-e-Fatimiyyah', which are observed across specific dates in the months of Jamadi al-Awwal to Jamadi al-Aakhar.

[11]The Chehlum or Arbaeen-e-Hussaini is the mourning day for Hazrat Imam Hussain and his 72 diehard companions, which is the 40th day after the 10th of Muharram.

[12]The 14 infallibles or Masoomen include: The Holy Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Hazrat Fatima and the 12 Imams: Hazrat Imam Ali; Hazrat Imam Hassan; Hazrat Imam Hussain; Hazrat Imam Ali Zain-ul-abedeen; Hazrat Imam Muhammad Baqir; Hazrat Imam Jaffar Sadiq; Hazrat Imam Musa Kazim; Hazrat Imam Ali Raza; Hazrat Imam Muhammad Taqi; Hazrat Imam Ali Naqi; Hazrat Imam Hassan-ul-Askari; and Hazrat Imam Mehhdi (peace be upon all of them).

These feelings of guilt and abandonment of the Shia faith, marrying a Sunni man and raising Sunni children were exacerbated by the comments and treatment of family members and extended relatives. One woman shared:

> I had to get married. I was lucky to receive a proposal from my coworker and we were both in love. The marriage institution was important before. But now I wonder, should I have waited for a proposal from a Shia family? After all, the love for *Ahlebait* (peace be upon him) should come before. I think in my youth the double pressure of getting married on time and not getting stuck in a loveless marriage consumed me. But I should have had more faith. This is why I cry more than others on the 9th and 10th of Muharram. I am so guilty of abandoning them, but I can't share this with my husband, children, or my siblings. It is just something I must live with.

Another woman shared that her elder sisters taunt her regularly about marrying a Sunni and abandoning Imam Hussain (peace be upon him):

> Whenever I visited the Majlis held by my sisters in their homes, I can't help but cry and mourn. My sisters taunt me by saying things like: "you, yourself have killed Imam Hussain and now you cry like this"; "You married an unbeliever- who is like the Muslims who killed Imam Hussain- now what is the point in crying"; "You are like the hypocritical Kufians[13]". They (my sisters) do not wait for an opportunity to hurt me as they see the guilt in my eyes and so they try to make it even worst.

Instilling Shia values without the husband's knowledge

Some women shared that they did not openly try to convert their children or influence their sectarian beliefs but were doing it in a clandestine way. Trying to expose their children to the Shia faith and hoping that understanding and respect entered the hearts and minds of their children was a source of constant anxiety and stress for women, as were the lies and hidden activities. Women agreed that the aim was not force their children to openly declare that they were Shias, but instead to make them understand that Shia beliefs were rational and that they must respect both sects. One woman shared that she used the time for her husband's travel to instill Shia beliefs in her infant child:

> My husband went abroad for two months for work, and I moved to my brother's house during that time. I lied that it was for security, and we felt unsafe sleeping alone, but my agenda was to teach my children what it was like to live in a Shia household. I asked my brother to take my children to the Imambargah (Shia mosque) for prayers and Friday sermons, and to discuss

[13]The people of Kufa (in Iraq) invited Imam Hussain (peace be upon them) to Kerbala and then abandoned him to face the assault of the army of Yazid, resulting in his and his companions martyrdom and the imprisonment of his female family members.

> Shia theology with him. We read the Nahjul Balagha[14] in the evenings together. It was a blissful and rewarding time. But we (children and woman participant) were careful not to share any of this with my husband.
>
> I can't help but think that those two months were not enough, and it depresses me to think how much more by brother's children are learning about Islam and the *Ahlebait*, as opposed to my own children. I pray that my husband starts travelling more regularly and we get more time at my brother's home. However, lying to my husband is also not something that I am comfortable with.

Another woman shared that as her children are growing, she makes it a point to visit her mother's home more often, especially on days that highlight Shia rituals, but in a way that her husband does not find out:

> When my children were young, I never visited my paternal house so much. Now I visit often citing that my mother is a widow and needs my help. My children are also attached to my mother, and they keep my secrets. The real reason why I visit often and ensure we spend most weekends at my mother's is to instill some Shia values in my children.
>
> My mother and I are also working to ensure that my children marry my siblings' or cousins' children, so that my grandchildren are Shias. Of course, I do not share any of this with my husband. At the end of the day there is a big difference between my home and my sister's home. Marrying a Shia man one can concentrate on so many other things in life, but I am stuck trying to use trickery and deceit to make my children Shias.

Fear for afterlife

Women discussed issues of the afterlife, which they had begun to think of in recent years but had never been a concern pre-marriage. Issues such fear of not being given Shia burial rights, and uncertainty of being united in the next life. One woman shared her concern about the domination of her husband and in-laws and how her brothers would not come forward when she died to secure Shia burial rituals:

> I gave up the right to ask my brothers to ensure my Shia burial when I went against their advice and married a Sunni man. Even if I imposed on them and asked them for this, my husband's family has their own graveyard in their village, and I know they will bury me there. My husband and children will also be buried there.
>
> But more than anything else I want Hazrat Imam Ali (peace be upon him) to come to my grave and intercede for me, as he does for other Shias. After my parent's death, I think of death regularly and what will happen in the grave. This worries me, but I have no one to talk to or ask for help. So,

[14]The Nahjul Balagha is a compilation of sayings of Hazrat Imam Ali (peace be upon him), which includes narrations about Islamic history, the teachings and life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and discussion about the meanings of the Quran.

> I secretly ask *Maula* (Hazrat Imam Ali- peace be upon him), that no matter when or how I am buried, and who is burying me, he must come to my grave, in *Sadqat*[15] of his daughter Hazrat Zainab (peace be upon him).

Another woman shared that she feared her afterlife and the separation from her parents versus her husband:

> I understand now that the period of *Barzakh*[16] and the final afterlife after judgement day cannot be the same for the Shias and the Sunnis. The Shias in *Barzakh* are with the *Ahlebait*. So are my parents and grandparents.
>
> If you had asked me before marriage and in the first few years after marriage, I would have said I want to be with my husband in the afterlife. But now, I don't feel this way. I love my husband but yearn to be with my parents and the *Ahlebait* in the next life. It doesn't make sense, but that's the way I feel.

Discussion

Six themes were found with respect to pre-marriage experiences of Shia women. Many women agreed that they were overwhelmed with love and eager to get married in a rush, before they were prevented, and this compelled them to dismiss any warnings or considerations about future problems. Other research confirms that when in love, women are in a haste to get married, especially because marriage affords social status to women in a conservative and traditional Muslim society (Khan 2003). Women also shared that the difficult social and family circumstances, such as orphanhood, divorcee status, and advanced age, prompted them to enter a love marriage with a Sunni man despite family resistance and warnings. Though women did not succumb to the warnings and resistance from family members and had a dismissive attitude before marriage, this was not forgotten by women and was a cause of long-standing and in some cases permanent estrangement with close family and relatives. Other scholars have also discussed the importance of religion in Muslim families and how going against the agreed religious norms can destroy family unity, create permanent rifts, lead to the isolation of women who marry outside their sect, and the classification of such women as 'outsiders' (Alghafli et al. 2014).

For many women, the decision to marry a Sunni man was strongly influenced by their partner's personality and nature rather than sectarian belief. Women had rationalized that being a Shia or a Syed Shia did not guarantee that the man would have morals and principals. Some women also had a history of rebellion and non-conformity, and this made it easier for them to fight for intersectarian

[15]Sadqat is awide term and used in the Quran to cover all kinds of charity. In this quote, it is being used to refer to Hazrat Imam Ali (peace be upon him) committing an act in the name of his noble and eminent daughter (Hazrat Zainab- peace be upon her), who is known to have saved the message of Islam after the battle of Kerbala.

[16]Barzakh denotes a place where people reside after death and await for judgment day. The deceased in Barzakh are granted some version of heaven or hell depending on their actions and practices in life. It is also believed that people will be reunited with their loved ones in Barzakh.

marriages. All women were able to find comfort in the pre-marriage verbal discussions and assurance by their partner that they will not let sectarianism ruin their lives and peace. Other studies confirm that the effect of new love and feelings of passion can facilitate early discussions at pre marriage stage, and that consensus and unity in couples about religious differences can help in strengthening the relationship (Van Acker 2003).

However, the post-marriage experiences of women, after some years of the wedding and having children, reveal silent but essential problems plaguing Shia women. Though all participants were committed to their marriage, they were deeply troubled by the long years of shaming by relatives and in-laws. Many women suffer from years of criticism, bullying and shaming at the hands of in-laws and their own family. With some relatives going so far as to label them as *'Munafiqs'* (hypocrites) and *'Kafirs'* (non-Muslims). Other research confirms that Shia women also face immense barriers from in-laws and relatives both before and after marriage, as many Muslim families consider it legally and culturally wrong to marry into the opposite sect and this is something they do not want the couple to forget (Çiğdem 2015). It is also true that sectarian differences and hatred between Shias and Sunnis are part of the fabric of Pakistani society (Grieser and Sökefeld 2015). Whereas many Sunnis consider Shias to be non-Muslims, many Shias believe that Sunnis are hypocrites. Love may suppress these differences, but with years of living together, social interaction with in-laws and relatives, social media communication of sectarian clashes, resentment and conflict begins to build (Ali 2021).

Over time, several issues start to emerge in woman's lives as they navigate family politics and the joint family system, bringing differences in their religious values and laws to the forefront. The first of these is the issue of inheritance rights, with Sunni interpretation of Islamic law allocating less inheritance to widows and daughters. Other scholars confirm that differences in beliefs about women's inheritance, can cause problems in Shia Sunni marriages (Adhha, 2020). Shia women are brought up in homes where their fathers and grandfathers have equally distributed property and assets to their daughters (Coulson and Hinchcliffe 2013), and though love is a powerful feeling, which prevents younger women from thinking about inheritance, with time they become anxious about their legal rights and inheritance from their husband and the inheritance of their daughters.

A second major difference is that Shias have many prayers and rituals attached to their sect, which are unique and not followed by the Sunni. For many women, over time and having faced life challenges such as loss, death of parents, and ill-health, they have become more committed to Shia prayers and rituals, which are important coping strategies and support measures for their life adjustment and survival. Separation in prayer and rituals creates a definite rift in the marriage and relationship with spouse, though these matters are not addressed openly. Other scholarship confirms that Shia interpretation of Islam, observance of prayers and rituals, and execution of laws in an evolving world is so different from the Sunni interpretation and practices, that there is little possibility of long-run harmony between people from the opposing sects (Inhorn 2006a, b).

Most children with Shia mothers and Sunni fathers end up following the Sunni faith, due to the greater dominance by the father and his parents and the dependence

of children on their father for financial provisions and social status. Other research confirms that in most intersectarian marriages, even with other religions, the children follow the religion and sect of their father (Bromberger 2014). This is a cause of great pain for mothers as they need for their children to at least understand the Shia faith and its teachings, even if they do not openly follow the sect. As a result, many women adopt clandestine tactics and end up lying to their husbands. Women use visitation time at their parents and sibling's homes to expose their children to the Shia faith and Shia rituals. Their purpose is not to make their children openly declare that they have chosen the Shia sect, but to make their children understand that the Shia faith is not un-Islamic or extremist. Other scholarship confirms that with intersectarian marriages, for some partners the agenda becomes to teach their loved ones to respect diversity and not to consider one sect inferior compared to the other (Karishma et al. 2021).

Of most concern however are the findings related to mental health in women. Across the interviews women mention feelings of guilt, fear, anxiety, and depression. Not only did women feel guilty about lying to their husbands about clandestinely sharing the realities of the Shia faith with their children, but they also feel immense guilt about having abandoned their Shia beliefs by opting for an intersectarian marriage, which they have begun to believe is akin to abandoning the *Ahlebait*. The loss of parents has forced some women to think more about their afterlife and many yearn to be counted as the followers of the *Ahlebait* in their graves and on judgement day. There are fears related to inheritance and burial rights and how they or their daughters will be treated after death. There is also anxiety about the final decision of their children to respect and remain tolerant of the Shia faith or then reject it all together. Other scholarship has highlighted that women who encounter differences in religious beliefs with spouse can face considerable mental health challenges (Aman et al. 2021).

Shia women who marry Sunni men are almost in no man's land. They are rejected by their own family, and their in-laws, and this makes them even more dependent on their spouse and children. This compels them to remain committed to their marriage and sustain feelings of love for their husband, but they are facing a quandary with regards to their status in the next life, which is also a cause for depression. This study has identified the challenges facing Shia women who remain in marriages with Sunni men through empirical research and has implications for important interventions for intersectarian married couples and their families which may include awareness sessions, post-marriage counseling, and *Nikah Nama* (legal marriage certificate) agreements and clauses to secure tolerant behavior. Furthermore, the findings have implications for developing freedom of religious practices for married couples in the country and sectarian religious education for children and youth.

Limitations of study

A limitation of the study is that I could not interview Sunni men in intersectarian marriages with Shia women. Another limitation is that the participants of this study are reflective of the urban and educated women population of Pakistan, and there is no representation of Shia women in intersectarian marriages from rural areas and

illiterate or semi-literate populations. However, the strength of this study lies in researching an area that has not been attempted before and the identification of pre and post marriage experiences of Shia women who entered a love marriage with Sunni men.

Conclusion and recommendations for future research

Currently Pakistan has no family-level social workers or marriage counseling centers available in communities as part of the primary healthcare support system. There is an immense role of female social workers and social policy officers in the country to support pre-marriage and post marriage counseling (Smith et al. 1995). Special attention needs to be given to making women aware of the long-run consequences and possible risks of intersectarian marriages so they can make informed decisions and secure their wellbeing. Furthermore, women choosing to remain in marriages and still experiencing love with their spouse may still be in need of counseling for thoughts of afterlife (Podikunju-Hussain 2006). Mental health screening is also needed for women in intersectarian marriages as some may be suffering from challenges such as depression and anxiety. There is also critical need for joint family counselling sessions in Pakistan including the in-laws, father, mother, and children to improve family level support and solidarity and raise awareness for the adverse emotional consequences of family stigmatization and bullying imposed upon women who marry into a family from a different sect.

More research is needed regarding legal reform which can help support women in intersectarian marriages. The protective reform must include ability to report hate speech of relatives and family; improved inheritance rights for Shia women married to Sunnis; and improved marriage certificate agreements at the time of nuptials. Finally, there is urgent need for Pakistan to develop a central database with records of intersectarian marriages. This would facilitate wider research to understand ongoing challenges and social and legal developments related to intersectarian unions in Pakistan. Future researchers may want to consider Sunni men's perceptions about their own challenges and their wives challenges. Furthermore, for future research, there needs to be sampling of other intersectarian marriages, such as Sunni women with Shia men, and also interreligious marriages such as Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men and so on. Till then the legal and social support recommendations made based on the findings of this study, may be considered relevant.

Appendix: informed consent and questionnaire

Informed consent cover letter

Dear Participant,

This study is an attempt to understand the experiences of Shia women who opted to marry Sunni men in love marriages. Research in the sociology of family and intersect marriages are intended to understand if any family level policies or social

policy support is needed in this area. Your participation in this study will help in two ways: (i) adding to scholarship about intersect marriages and the experience of Shia women, and (ii) identifying if any policy support is needed for such families.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and there is no compensation being offered. If you choose to participate, the interview involves a brief questionnaire, which will take an estimated 20 to 30 minutes to answer. You are free to exit the interview or withdraw at any point. No names will be asked, and no confidential data will be taken or disseminated. Your anonymity and confidentiality is guaranteed. The interview will be recorded only so that no data is lost, and the recordings will be stored safely with the Principal Investigator, and later deleted.

If you agree to participate, please sign and the research assistant (Ms Kundan Asif) will coordinate a suitable time for interview with you)
Informed Consent signature_____

Principal Investigator:
Dr Sara Rizvi Jafree
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Forman Christian College
Email: sarajafree@fccollege.edu.pk

Semi-structured questionnaire

City: _____
Age: _____
Years of marriage: _____
Number of children: _____
Last degree attained: _____

(1) What were your reasons for choosing to opt for intersectarian marriage with a Sunni man?
(2) Can you share the response of family/ friends/ community when you shared news about intending to wed a Sunni man?
(3) What internal questions and thoughts, if any, did you have pre-marriage?
(4) Did differences in sectarian beliefs create any challenges for you after marriage? If so, can you describe the ways it impacted your life?
(5) Can you describe the kind of social support gained from families, in-laws, and friends after marriage (prompt: For example, support to help you settle in and mingle in a Sunni family)?
(6) Do sectarian differences influence yours and you spouses' choices for child upbringing?

The family life cycle was used to explain the different processes that occur in families over time. Sociologists view each stage as having its own structure with different challenges, achievements, and accomplishments that transition the family from one stage to the next. For example, the problems and challenges that a family experiences in Stage 1 as a married couple with no children are likely much different than those experienced in Stage 5 as

a married couple with teenagers. The success of a family can be measured by how well they adapt to these challenges and transition into each stage. While sociologists use the family life cycle to study the dynamics of family over time, consumer and marketing researchers have used it to determine what goods and services families need as they progress through each stage (Murphy and Staples 1979).

As early "stage" theories have been criticized for generalizing family life and not accounting for differences in gender, ethnicity, culture, and lifestyle, less rigid models of the family life cycle have been developed. One example is the **family life course**, which recognizes the events that occur in the lives of families but views them as parting terms of a fluid course rather than in consecutive stages (Strong and DeVault 1992). This type of model accounts for changes in family development, such as the fact that today, childbearing does not always occur with marriage. It also sheds light on other shifts in the way family life is practised. Society's modern understanding of family rejects rigid "stage" theories and is more accepting of new, fluid models. In fact contemporary family life has not escaped the phenomenon that Zygmunt Bauman calls **fluid** (or **liquid**) **modernity**, a condition of constant mobility and change in relationships (2000).

When considering the role of family in society, functionalists uphold the notion that families are an important social institution and that they play a key role in stabilizing society. They also note that family members take on status roles in a marriage or family. The family—and its members—perform certain functions that facilitate the prosperity and development of society.

Once children are produced, the family plays a vital role in training them for adult life. As the primary agent of socialization and enculturation, the family teaches young children the ways of thinking and behaving that follow social and cultural norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Parents teach their children manners and civility. A well-mannered child reflects a well-mannered parent.

Parents also teach children gender roles. Gender roles are an important part of the economic function of a family. In each family, there is a division of labour that consists of instrumental and expressive roles. Men tend to assume the instrumental roles in the family, which typically involve work outside of the family that provides financial support and establishes family status. Women tend to assume the expressive roles, which typically involve work inside of the family, which provides emotional support and physical care for children (Crano and Aronoff 1978). According to functionalists, the differentiation of the roles on the basis of sex ensures that families are well balanced and coordinated. Each family member is seen as performing a specific role and function to maintain the functioning of the family as a whole.

When family members move outside of these roles, the family is thrown out of balance and must recalibrate in order to function properly. For example, if the father assumes an expressive role such as providing daytime care for the children, the mother must take on an instrumental role such as gaining paid employment outside of the home in order for the family to maintain balance and function.

Critical sociologists are quick to point out that North American families have been defined as private entities, the consequence of which historically has been to

see family matters as issues concerning only those within the family. Serious issues including domestic violence and child abuse, inequality between the sexes, the right to dispose of family property equally, and so on, have been historically treated as being outside of state, legal, or police jurisdiction. The feminist slogan of the 1960s and 1970s—"the personal is the political"—indicates how feminists began to draw attention to the broad social or *public* implications of matters long considered private or inconsequential. As women's roles had long been relegated to the private sphere, issues of power that affected their lives most directly were largely invisible. Speaking about the lives of middle-class women in mid-century North America, Betty Friedan described this problem as "the problem with no name":

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the 20th century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?" (1963, p. 15).

One focus of critical sociology therefore is to highlight the political-economic context of the inequalities of power in family life. The family is often not a haven but rather an arena where the effects of societal power struggles are felt. This exercise of power often entails the differentiation and performance of family status roles. *Why* are women expected to perform the "expressive" roles in the family while the men perform "instrumental" roles, and what are the implications of this division of labour? Critical sociologists therefore study conflicts as simple as the enforcement of rules from parent to child, or more serious issues such as domestic violence (spousal and child), sexual assault, marital rape, and incest, as products of power structures in broader society. Blood and Wolfe's classic (1960) study of marital power found that the person with the most access to value resources held the most power. As money is one of the most valuable resources, men who worked in paid labour outside of the home held more power than women who worked inside the home. Disputes over the division of household labour tend also to be a common source of marital discord. Household labour offers no wages and, therefore, no power. Studies indicate that when men do more housework, women experience more satisfaction in their marriages, reducing the incidence of conflict (Coltrane 2000).

The political and economic context is also key to understanding changes in the structure of the family over the 20th and 21st centuries. The debate between functionalist and critical sociologists on the rise of non-nuclear family forms is a case in point. Since the 1950s, the functionalist approach to the family has emphasized the importance of the nuclear family—a married man and woman in a socially approved sexual relationship with at least one child—as the basic unit of an orderly and functional society. Although only 39 percent of families conformed to this model in 2006, in functionalist approaches, it often operates as a model of the *normal* family, with the implication that non-normal family forms lead to a variety of society-wide dysfunctions. On the other hand, critical perspectives emphasize that the diversity of family forms does not indicate the "decline of the family" (i.e., of the ideal of the nuclear family) so much as the diverse response of

the family form to the tensions of gender inequality and historical changes in the economy and society. The nuclear family should be thought of less as a normative model for how families should be and more as an historical anomaly that reflected the specific social and economic conditions of the two decades following the World War II.

Challenges families face

As the structure of family changes over time, so do the challenges families face. Events like divorce and remarriage present new difficulties for families and individuals. Other long-standing domestic issues such as abuse continue to strain the health and stability of families.

Divorce, remarriages, child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, inability to transmit morals and values.

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Data availability Data is available at reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval IRB consent has been taken from the Forman Christian College University

Informed consent Informed consent was taken from all participants.

Conflict of interest There is none to declare.

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