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**The Impact of Higher Education and Societal Expectations on Marriage
Choices: A Qualitative Study of University Graduated Women in Lahore**

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Abstract

This research is intended to investigate the effect of higher education on marriage choices of university graduated women in Lahore, Pakistan, as well as investigate the impact of societal expectations on their decision making. Marriage in Pakistani setting is a strong social institution, which is determined by family, cultural values and traditional practices, but, with the growing access to higher education, women are slowly changing their attitude towards the choice of partners, time of marriage and independence of decisions. The research objectives are: (1) the ways in which higher education influences the criteria that women use when choosing a marriage partner, (2) the ways in which the expectations of the society affect their marriage choices. The qualitative research design was adopted as the research methodology and a convenience sampling technique was used to choose 12 unmarried university graduated women. In-depth interviews were used to gather data with ethical considerations. The thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke has been used to analyze the data. The key findings include that higher education is a key factor in boosting women confidence, awareness, which makes them more independent and informed in their marital decisions. The participants are more and more inclined to perceive marriage as a part of life and not its main purpose and attach significance to emotional compatibility, mutual respect and personal readiness. Although family involvement remains still significant, but it has now become more consultative rather than controlling. The societal norms and expectations still have influence in decision making, but women have shown strength in weighing the pressure against their own preference. In general, the results suggest that there is a gradual social change in which the old values and the new modern views coexist and educated women are able to redefine marriage in their own terms. The study is a contribution to the few qualitative studies done on the relationship between higher education and marriage

choices in Lahore, Pakistan and offers important insights to policymakers, schools and the society to empower women, give them autonomy and informed choice of personal life preferences.

Keywords

Higher Education, Societal Expectations, Marriage Choices, University Graduated Women, Lahore Pakistan

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The family is considered as the main social institution, and individuals are brought together by every society towards shared and collaborative units that give support and care, especially for children. Families are regarded the most ancient and special institution, providing members of the family with emotional well-being, happiness and satisfaction, greatly influencing the lives of individuals. Marriage on the other hand is a legal partnership that brings child bearing, sexual relations and financial cooperation (Macionis, 2014). A long term social and legal contract between two people, depending on the mutual rights and liabilities of the couple, is how most civilizations see marriage. In many instances, a marriage is founded on a love relationship but this is not always the case. However, it normally implies a sexual relationship between two people (Crossman, 2019). In most societies, marriage is considered as fundamental social institution, deeply intertwined with cultural norms, economic stability and personal aspirations. However, as women achieve higher education, their attitudes towards marriages tend to be changed, influenced by the career ambitions, financial independence and the changing societal expectations (Giddens, 1992).

The choice of mate has traditionally been controlled by family expectations and cultural norms in traditional societies like Pakistan, which frequently restrict women's autonomy in selecting life partners. But there has been a noticeable shift as women's educational attainment has increased, giving them more control over marital choices. One effective catalyst is education (Jejeebhoy, 1995) giving women the freedom to choose their spouse.

A society-driven country like Pakistan gives its strong emphasis on the marriage as one of the main events in the life of a woman. But with increasing women in higher education, conflicts are

created between the traditional and modern desires. According to Global Gender Report (2023), Pakistan ranked 142nd out of 146 countries in term of Gender equality which revealed that the country had continued to have disparities in education, workforce participation and roles in society. Nonetheless, the number of women going into universities has increased, and this change has caused marital delays and changed the requirements in the choice of partners (Hussain and Qureshi, 2021).

For many higher education has been a powerful agent of change, especially in the lives of women, while influencing their aspirations of career and social mobility as well as their sense of personal values. Higher education does not only increase career opportunities but also reshapes women's expectation about marriage, autonomy and gender roles, Cherlin (2004). Many women choose marriage based on a function of personal preferences, characteristics of their educational success, and social expectations. The research below highlights how university graduated women in Lahore deal with these challenges when making marriage related decisions.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Despite an increase in the number of women getting higher education in Pakistan, there remains still considerable gap in understanding how this educational attainment influences their marriage decisions. Various studies emphasized the economic as well as social advantages of women's education. (Lloyd & Mensch, 2008; Aslam, 2009) but few studies have qualitatively explored the nuanced ways in which university-educated women negotiate societal expectations about marriage. Previous quantitative studies on Pakistan also reported that higher education delays marriage. (Sathar & Lloyd, 1994) and enhance women autonomy in marital decisions (Hussain,

2005). Although, an in-depth analysis of the relationship between higher education & societal expectations and marital choices has not been executed yet.

This research takes a qualitative exploratory perspective to analyze the experiences and perspectives as well as implications of higher education and societal expectations on marriage choices. The research explores how advanced education influences marital decision-making across three key dimensions: personal aspirations, familial and societal pressure and socio-cultural norms. This research focuses on university graduated women as the sample, to examine how their academic achievements interact with traditional expectations to determine their marital path.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The key objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine how higher education influences university graduated women's criteria for selecting a marriage partner.
2. To explore how societal expectations shape the marriage decisions of university graduated women.

Furthermore, this study seeks to explore marriage decision-making through key dimensions: personal autonomy, familial/ social pressures and socio-cultural norms. The indicators include independent decision making in spouse selection which comes under the domain of personal autonomy; parental and community expectations regarding marriage timing and partner preferences which are counted under umbrella of familial/social pressure and prevailing stereotypes about educated women, dowry expectations and conflicts between modern

aspirations and traditional marital norms which falls under socio-cultural features. These features are explored at individual level to understand how higher education influences the women's marital agency while navigating traditional expectation.

1.3 Significance of the study

This study presents valuable discussions on education and marriage in Lahore, Pakistan by highlighting the impact of higher education, understanding how higher education reshape women's marital aspirations and challenges traditional norms. Also analyzing the conflicts between familial expectations and individual autonomy in decision making.

Moreover, the findings of this study provides valuable guidance for policymakers and educational institutions to design policies that support women's empowerment and promote equitable decision-making in personal domains like marriage.

By using exploratory qualitative approach, this research aims to understand the lived experiences of university graduated women, offering a deeper understanding of how education and societal expectations influence their marital choices.

1.4 Definitions

1.4.1 Higher Education:

Higher education can be used to classify many types of higher educational institutions including university. Higher educational institutions can often generally organize themselves in many ways, typically as a part of university, and separately, just like university and other tertiary education institutions. Higher education is generally thought of as a set that includes the university as a subset of higher education. Also, higher education and university can be legally

synonymous in some context (Assié-Lumumba, 2005). However, they do not refer to the same reality.

Higher education is described as formal tertiary education gained at universities, colleges, or professional institutes that lead to academic qualifications (e.g., bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree). It includes formalized educational and professional training that develops cognitive capacity, critical thinking, and social mobility (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019). In this context, higher education has been operationalized as completing an undergraduate or postgraduate degree from a recognized university.

Higher education has been shown to change traditional marriage patterns since educated women tend to look for mates who share their level of education and financial security. This development is indicative of larger cultural shifts in which marital prospects are more correlated with educational level. According to research, women with more education typically marry later and choose their mates more carefully, giving compatibility and shared values more weight than conventional success indicators like wealth alone (Musick et al., 2012; Schwartz, 2013).

1.4.2 Societal expectations:

Societal expectations refer to normative pressures, cultural traditions and gender roles imposed by family, community and broader social structures that influence individual behaviors and decisions (Giddens, 2006). In the context of this study societal expectations include traditional norms regarding marriage timing, spousal selection criteria (e.g., caste, economic status, family background) and gender roles in marital relationships (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016).

1.4.3 Marriage Choices:

Marriage choices refer to the decision making processes involved in selecting a spouse, including preferences related to education, career, financial stability, personal traits and family compatibility (Xu & Whyte, 1990). This study focuses on how higher education societal expectations shape these preferences among university graduated women.

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions include:

1. How does higher education shape the criteria university graduated women use to select a marriage partner?
2. How do societal expectations influence the marriage decisions of university graduated women?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Educational Attainment and Delayed Marriage

Higher education significantly increases age at which women marry. Research has shown that every additional year of education means they marry roughly 0.6 years later. Education lengthens the timeline for self-development as a person, and it also affects women's view of life and marriage. College makes a greater commitment of time, but it also allows women to broaden their view and one's aspirations in life (Raymo, 2013). Educated women often intentionally choose to marry later in life to pursue educational and career interests (Grow & Van Bavel, 2022), but research has shown that families where women have higher education are less likely to marry in life and therefore children are less likely to marry early, and also are less likely to have children early (Singh & Samara, 1996).

2.2 Changing Partner preferences and Homogamy

Higher education changes the criteria for partners while it also shifts the emphasis from traditional criteria such as caste and family status, to feelings of emotional compatibility, ideas of shared intellectual aspirations, and mutual respect (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016; Schwartz & Han, 2014). Women from university educated backgrounds show increasing preferences for either partners with same level of education or partners with a higher education level, further supporting the trend of educational homogamy. The variability of social circles at university, combined with a culture of progressive values, help shape these changes. Research has shown that educated women will value emotional intelligence, gender equity, and shared goals, value equality, social and economic status (Stevens et al., 1990).

2.3 Resistance to Traditional Marriage Norms

Higher education promotes critical thinking and creates an environment where many women begin to question traditional customs, including arranged marriage and rigid gender roles (Kabeer, 1999). Educated women often begin to seek autonomy for themselves and enter into self-choice marriages, challenging traditional norms of their culture. In this regard, the broader social and familial context may occasionally put pressure on women to fulfil the expectations of their society and family, which at times means creating a division between modern aspirations and traditional cultural practices (Farooq & Tabassum, 2022). The university environment exposes women to new ideas and the ability to interact in new ways, further reducing the chances that women will comply with previous expectations of gender and gender roles (Singh & Samara, 1996).

2.4 Financial Independence and Empowerment

Financial independence, one of primary benefits of higher education, is an important resource that allows women to make their own decisions regarding marriage. Economically independent women are often able to delay marriage or reject proposals when they do not align with their career aspirations (Becker, 1964; Kabeer, 2018). With financial stability, women will not have the burden of feeling pressured to marry for economic security, and will be able to pursue their own goals first in their own time (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). In South Asia, independent or financially sound women may social stigmatized for delaying marriage for career goals (Kabeer, 2018).

2.5 Societal and Familial Pressures

Even with higher education, women are often the subject of societal and familial pressures relating to marriage timing and partner choices. The expectations surrounding hypergamy—marrying men of superior social or economic capital—remain strong in the South Asian context (Schwartz & Han, 2014). These pressures have been in direct conflict with educated women's notions of egalitarianism (Jejeebhoy, 2000). In conservative contexts, a highly educated woman may potentially suffer from a "marriageability penalty," where potential partners or the families of the potential partners feel they are over qualified, and therefore lessen their desirability (Hu & Qian, 2022; Harknett et al., 2021).

2.6 Socioeconomic and Cultural Barriers

The patterns of public access to higher education and its benefits for marital autonomy continue to vary by socioeconomic class. Girls from families with low income often have resource, economic, and sociocultural barriers to higher education and therefore early marriage is a more enticing option (Schaffnit et al., 2020). Quite the opposite, girls from wealthier families have more resources to delay marriage and seek educational opportunities, and people may actually have cultural and structural obstacles to their educational achievement because more than economic circumstances restrict educational opportunities. As an example, in rural communities, both wealthy and poor girls are limited by such restrictions as the influence of patriarchal norms and the lack of freedom to move around, and these restrictions create a boundary around marriage and determine the area that women occupy in the family structure (Panzai et al., 2024). Although there are real advantages to education, the Pakistani society continues to exert much cultural pressure on the choice of women concerning marriage. Conventional practices are

inclined towards early marriage and they continue to perpetuate notions of family honor and the role of men and women. This is normally contrary to the desires of women in regards to their education. In rural areas particularly, such issues as early marriages and domestic duties come in the way of women achieving greater educational attainment. That leaves them with fewer choices in terms of employment and the way to live their lives. All these boundaries actually demonstrate how patriarchal ideologies continue to play a role in influencing what individuals expect out of women, both prior to their marriage or many years after. An expanded intersectional prism that includes caste, religion and family honour factors identifies the structural constraints that still limit women autonomy to keep up oppressive structures of oppression on women even though the individual may be exposed to educational achievement (Crenshaw,1989).

2.7 Higher Education and Women Empowerment in Pakistan

Higher education plays a central role in empowering women in Pakistan. It boosts their decision-making skills and enhances independence in individual issues, including decisions about marriage. Research indicates that when women attain greater education, they tend to be more assertive agency in the choices of life partners. They are also less inclined to adhere to the old gendered traditions effectively (PMC, 2025). Such women are more likely to appreciate such aspects as compatibility and common beliefs in a partner. They also stress on respect to each other and this truly demonstrates how schooling accumulates self-assurance. It, in its turn, drives against the patriarchal practices (PMC, 2025). Women with higher education tends to be more financially liberated as well. They acquire broader perspectives on society, which assists them with bargaining of better positions in family relationships and wider communities (Ashraf,

2025). In general, these studies indicate the powerful influence of higher awareness about allowing women to marry on their own terms.

2.8 Impact of Higher Education on Social Status and Marriage Timing

Research carried out in Pakistan indicates that higher education actually influences the empowerment of women as well as when they choose to marry. For instance, the research shows, women who pursue higher education are more likely to delay marriage. They are more interested in personal development, establishing a career, and finding some financial stability first before knotting the marital tie. Thing is, these delays are the desire to have partners who are in fact a good fit with their smarts and social ambitions (Shah & Butt, 2025). This is further reinforced in urban areas, where parents there force their girls to pursue education as a means of accumulating power and getting married in the future (Khubaib, Agha, & Sabeen, 2020). Overall, educated women turn out to postpone marriage and acquire additional influence in the choice of the right time and person to it.

A common finding across demographic research is the inverse relationship between women's education and early marriage: the more educated the women, the later the marriage (Jejeebhoy, 2000; PDHS, 2017–18). The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey has found that women with secondary or higher education marry much later than their uneducated counterparts, which is a strong indicator of education being the main factor of delayed marriage and thus women's greater control over the time of entering marriage (National Institute of Population Studies [NIPS] & ICF, 2019).

2.9 Education, Career Aspirations, and Societal Change

Besides, one of the main factors that women consider when deciding whom to marry is the woman's education, which is directly related to higher socio-economic status and more career opportunities. Research has revealed that the probability of women's participation in the labor market and their attainment of financial independence is higher for those with advanced education, which, in turn, supports their negotiating power in personal matters including marriage selection (Shair et al., 2024). This economic power of women empowers some of them to the extent that they do not give in to the societal pressure of early marriage and, instead, go on to live a professional life, which, in a way, portrays the changing of the conventional gender roles in urban settings.

2.10 Higher Education, Empowerment and Agency

Higher education is often considered a significant and foremost means of women's empowerment as it equips women with the resources, skills, exposure and aspirations that increase their ability to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999). The impact of education manifests not only by improving the economic position but also by influencing one's identity and perceived life choices; in general, the more educated a woman is the more likely she will be to report higher levels of confidence, access to information and power in household and marriage decisions (Jejeebhoy, 2000). In the context of South Asia, some scholars claim that education can help women to “rule” the system — postpone marriage and become more selective regarding partners — however, the degree of such effect varies with the larger social context (Jejeebhoy, 2000; Sathar & Kazi, 2000).

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is based on Feminist Theory which asserts that gender inequality is socially constructed which is maintained through cultural values, family traditions, and institutional practices, such as education and marriage. Feminist scholars note that gender inequalities restrict opportunities for women, as men are afforded more value and authority, whereas women are expected to fulfill traditional roles of marriage and caregiving. In this research, Feminist Theory serves as means to understand how women are empowered through education by providing knowledge, confidence, and agency to resist oppressive marital norms. It reveals ways in which women resist expectations to marry early, refuse to comply with family-arranged offers without their consent, or put marriage before a professional career regardless of education level.

This lens will facilitate the research as it examines:

- How university-educated women challenge normative customs of gender inequality.
- How education facilitates women's balancing agency and personal autonomy, and familial or societal expectations within marriage.
- How women's agency in choosing a partner mirrors the larger debates against patriarchal domination of women's lives.

Therefore, Feminist Theory is applicable in this study since it not only accounts for the structural inequalities that shape women's marriage choices but also captures the ways education empowers women with means to resist, renegotiate, or remake these social norms.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Nature of Study

The research adopts general qualitative research design to examine how higher education and societal expectations influence marriage choices of university graduated women in Pakistan. A qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding the personal experiences, perceptions and social pressures that shape women's marital decision-making in a society.

The study uses thematic analysis to examine patterns and themes that emerge from participants narratives. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used method in qualitative research that allows the researcher to systematically identify and interpret recurring ideas and meanings within the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a research technique which enables researchers to discover and assess and document thematic patterns found in their data. The research shows how educated women handle issues which include their ability to make independent decisions and their relationships with their families and their community obligations and their changing choices about partners.

The study investigates how university graduated women handle the conflict between educational commitments and traditional values and modern societal changes during their process of selecting a marriage partner.

4.2 In-depth-interview

The research method used in this study enables researchers to study women's viewpoints because it provides essential insights into their understanding and personal experiences which determine

their marital decisions according to cultural and societal expectations. The participants were asked open-ended questions to share their thoughts and experiences freely.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

4.3.1 Privacy and Confidentiality

All necessary steps were taken to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. All the data that was collected was anonymized, and did not contain identifiable, private information to secure the identity of participants.

4.3.2 Data Security

Steps to maintain data security were put in place to protect research data. The measures included secure digital and hard copy storage, limited access to sensitive information and encryption of digital files, among other measures.

4.3.3 Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the research. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

4.3.4 Informed Consent

Prior to participation, participants received detailed explanation of the research purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants had the opportunity to ask any question, and participants were included in the study only once they provided voluntary informed consent.

4.3.5 Ethical Approval

The study obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Forman Christian College University (FCCU). This approval ensures that all research practices are completed in accordance with best ethical practices and standards.

4.4 Sample Design

The sample was selected through convenience sampling to include university-graduated women who could provide information on how higher education and cultural expectations affect their marriage choices.

4.4.1 Selection Criteria

Specifically, the proposed sample includes unmarried Pakistani women in Lahore between the ages of 22-30 who have at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited university. These women were selected because they represented a population who have received higher education, yet had to negotiate cultural expectations of marriage.

4.4.2 Sampling Method

The researchers used non-probability convenience sampling to select participants who were accessible and willing to share their marriage decision-making experiences. The researchers used this method because they wanted to study participants' lived experiences.

The researcher selected university-educated women based on their availability and relevance to the research topic. Convenience sampling proved effective for the exploratory study because it

helped in generating extensive detailed data which showed how higher education and societal expectations affected marriage selection.

4.4.3 Sample Size

The sample size was 12 participants. This number was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which was defined as the point in data collection where no further relevant information is being obtained (Dworkin, 2012). A pilot interview was conducted before the main study to test the interview guide and data collection process. However, the pilot interview revealed several limitations in the initial interview guide, including (unclear questions, poor flow, and misinterpretation by participant). As a result, the interview guide was revised to address these issues with greater clarity questions. The revised guide was used for all the main study interviews, thereby strengthening the validity and reliability of data collection process.

4.5 Data Collection

The data was collected through semi-structured, face to face interviews lasting 30-40 minutes each. The interviews were in Urdu or English based on participants' choices to maximize comfort and clarity. They were audio recorded with participants' consent, later the data was transcribed verbatim so it could be analyzed.

In order to ensure participant safety, the data gathering process consisted of recruiting participants using university alumni networks and professional associations, conducting interviews in quiet, neutral, private settings to protect confidentiality and ensure their comfort and safety, and addressing any concerns from participants before and after the interviews.

4.5.1 Interview Guide

Data collection was guided by semi-structured interview guide. The guide included open ended questions developed after a literature review. The interview guide consisted of two parts: The first section gathered the socio-demographic information of participants while the second section focused on core interview questions exploring how higher education, societal expectations, family influence, autonomy and modern versus traditional pressures shaped their marital choices.

4.5.2 Socio-demographics

Demographic information such as age, education level, parent's educational level, occupation, family type and socioeconomic status was collected to provide context and aid in the analysis of findings. This information was collected and was used only for research purposes.

4.6 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed manually using thematic analysis, following the six step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke's (2006). Thematic analysis helped you to systematically identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning in the data from the interviews. The first phase to thematic analysis was familiarization whereby the researcher listened to each audio recording and read the transcripts sometimes and made notes. In the second phase, the researcher coded the data by highlighting particular phrases and responses not necessarily in a linear way but rather that fit the research questions. As per Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance, in the third phase, the researcher then grouped the coded responses into more broader and abstract themes such as autonomy, social expectations, family and changing partner preferences. In phase four, the researcher reviewed the themes to check for internal consistency and coherence with the larger

data set. Phase five consisted of the researcher defining and naming the themes, as well as providing definitions for each theme and capturing the essence of each theme. In phase six, the researcher composed a thematic write-up of the analysis, which included quotes from participants replying to the theme(s) of the analysis and includes citations referencing the goals of the study and the prior literature. The analytic method developed through this study improved our knowledge about how university-educated women experience and handle marriage expectations which arise from their academic background and societal norms.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

The analysis of the interviews conducted with university-educated women in Lahore shows how higher education and societal expectations affect marriage choices for women in this area. The research demonstrates that higher education enables women to develop their personal growth and critical thinking and decision making skills. The participants explained their university experience because it helped them develop better self-confidence and self-awareness and changed their understanding of marriage from an obligatory duty to a relationship based on shared values.

Marriage decisions remain subject to societal expectations and cultural norms while their effects on educated women show signs of gradual reduction. The participants showed that they understood family expectations and societal pressure and stereotypes but they maintained control over their decisions. The research findings show that educated women now choose relationship compatibility and respect and emotional maturity and career aspirations as their primary partner selection criteria rather than traditional standards which include caste and strict family ties.

The findings of the research demonstrate that people now choose their marriage partners based on their personal preferences because they have gained education and their society has stopped controlling their choices.

The entire findings of the research revolve around the following main themes;

1. Personal Development and Critical Thinking through Higher Education
2. Changing Perceptions of Marriage through Education
3. Education shaped Partner Selection Criteria

4. Career Aspirations, Financial Independence & Delayed Marriage
5. Family Influence & Negotiated Autonomy
6. Societal Expectations & Marriage Pressure
7. Societal Perceptions and Stereotypes about Educated Women
8. Balancing Modern Values & Cultural Tradition
9. Need for Societal Change and Advice for Women

Summary of Thematic Findings

Table

Summary of thematic findings for study, showing broad themes, sub themes, and one relevant quote.

Broad Themes	Sub Themes	One relevant quote
Personal Development and Critical Thinking through Higher Education	Development of Confidence and Self-Identity Development of Critical Thinking Awareness of Rights and Responsibilities	<i>“Before university, I was very shy and I did not share my ideas with anyone, but now I feel confident to express myself.” (Age 25, MPhil)</i>
Changing Perceptions of Marriage through Education	Marriage as a Choice, not Obligation Importance of Personal Qualities Realistic understanding of Marriage & Communication	<i>“Society thinks girl should marry early, but I want to achieve my goals first.” (Age 26, MPhil)</i>
Education shaped Partner Selection Criteria	Preference for Educational Compatibility Importance of Intellectual Compatibility Emotional Maturity and Respect Rejection of Toxic or Dominating Behavior	<i>“I want a partner who has his own deep opinions and does not just follow others.” (Age 24, Graduated)</i>
Career Aspirations, Financial Independence & Delayed Marriage	Career Prioritization over Early Marriage Importance of Financial Stability Expectation of Spouse Support for Career	<i>“Financial stability is very important, society teaches us from childhood that the life partner is usually the one who will manage the household expenses. So it’s essential that he should be financially stable.” (Age 24, MPhil)</i>
Family Influence & Negotiated Autonomy	Freedom with Family Support Family Expectations (Education, Character, Caste) Shared Decision-Making	<i>“I have a freedom to choose partner, but my family supports and guides me.” (Age 24, Graduated)</i>
Societal Expectations & Marriage Pressure	Indirect Social Pressure Age Pressure Resistance to Pressure	<i>“I am not going to marry under pressure, I want to achieve my goals first.” (Age 24, MPhil student)</i>
Societal Perceptions and Stereotypes about Educated Women	Positive Perceptions Negative Stereotypes Limited Influence of Stereotypes	<i>“People think educated women are too choosy and independent.” (Age 25, MPhil)</i>
Balancing Modern Values & Cultural Tradition	Respect for Cultural Tradition Importance of Personal Values & Independence	<i>“I respect old traditions but I will not compromise my identity.” (Age 25, MPhil)</i>

Need for Societal Change and Advice for Women	Need for Positive Attitude Reducing Judgment & Pressure Advice to Women	<i>“Education should be seen as strength, not a problem.” (Age 24, Graduated)</i>
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Thematic Findings:

5.1 Personal Development and Critical Thinking through Higher Education

This theme demonstrates how higher education helps develop women into confident women who acquire new ways of thinking. Participants described their educational journey as more than just obtaining a degree because it included their personal development and life changes. The university experience provided students with multiple viewpoints through their social connections and academic debates which helped them develop critical thinking skills and make independent choices.

Participants described how their family and societal norms governed their thoughts before they enrolled at university. Higher education gave them the power to challenge existing societal standards and create their personal viewpoints. The transformation affected their views about finding a partner and choosing their profession and living their life. Education served as the main source which helped women gain power through self-awareness and confidence building and their ability to make informed choices.

5.1.1: Development of Confidence and Self-Identity

The study showed that participants developed their personal growth through improved confidence and better understanding of their self-identity. Many women’s shared that they were initially shy which prevented them from sharing their opinions. The university environment

made them more confident and willing to express themselves. The participant response shows that she moved from having low self-confidence to demonstrating her ability to express herself. The university environment offered her chances to interact and participate which contributed to her personal development and helped her gain confidence to share her thoughts. She stated,

“Before university, I was very shy and I did not share my ideas with anyone, but now I feel confident to express myself.” (Age 25, MPhil student, Employed)

Another participant’s statement emphasizes the development of independence in decision making. The research demonstrates that higher education develop female students' self-assurance and enable them to make more independent decisions, which leads to increased personal autonomy.

“Higher education has increased my confidence in making independent decisions.” (Age 24, Graduated)

One of the participant demonstrates advanced self-identity development because their self-confidence is based on their strong belief in themselves and their ability to make correct decisions. The individual experiences personal autonomy because she possesses the ability to choose her life path.

“Now I believe in my own judgment and I feel I can decide what is best for me.” (Age 26, Employed)

These responses from the participant’s shows that education plays an important role in boosting women’s self-confidence, which directly impacts their ability to make marriage related decisions.

5.1.2: Development of Critical Thinking

The educational process produced critical thinking skills as one of its main results. The participants reported that their university experience enabled them to consider different opinions while developing their decision-making skills.

One participant's response shows how she changed from being a follower to establishing her own independent beliefs. The university experience provided her with various perspectives which enabled her to develop her own critical thinking abilities and form independent opinions.

“Before university, I used to follow what others said, but now I think from different perspective.”

(Age 25, MPhil student)

Another participant statement demonstrates the development of analytical abilities and skills. The education system between her and her current state has taught her to assess situations through more careful evaluation instead of making instant judgments.

“I learned to analyze situations instead of judging things quickly.” (Age 24, Graduated)

A further participant establishes her critical thinking skills through her balanced method of thinking about complex problems. She displays open-mindedness through listening to others but maintains her self-assuredness in her own judgment. The people demonstrate advanced critical thinking skills because they evaluate different viewpoints yet base their decisions on personal judgment.

“Now I listen to others but also trust my own understanding.” (Age 24, Employed)

The move from acceptance to reasoning is a clear indication of the importance of education in promoting rational behavior and minimizing dependence on others.

5.1.3: Awareness of Rights and Responsibilities

Participants who took part in this study reported that they gained better understanding of their rights and duties especially when it comes to their relationships and marriage. The participants used their education to identify toxic patterns which appeared in their relationships and marriages and select suitable solutions and make informed choices.

One of the participant showed how education helped her learn about her personal rights within marriage through her answer. The research shows that higher education not only provides knowledge but also empowers women to recognize their rights and responsibilities, and advocate for themselves in marital relationships.

“Education has made me aware of my rights in marriage.” (Age 25, MPhil student)

The statement from another participant demonstrates that an individual can detect unhealthy and problematic elements in the marriage or relationship. This suggests that education increases awareness and allows women to know what to look out for, thus making better-informed decisions about their lives.

“An educated women can identify red flags and make better decisions.” (Age 26, Employed)

The participant demonstrates knowledge about both rights and responsibilities through his response. The mature perspective shows that people need to recognize both their entitled rights and their required duties which shows their knowledge about relationship dynamics.

“Now I understand my responsibilities as well as my rights.” (Age 24, MPhil)

Overall, this theme demonstrates how higher education helps women achieve empowerment through increased confidence and critical thinking skills and improved self-awareness. The qualities of these characteristics shape their views about marriage while helping them to choose with greater independence and deeper thought.

5.2 Changing Perceptions of Marriage through Education

The theme of this study shows how higher education changes women's perceptions of marriage. The participants showed a complete transformation from their previous belief that marriage existed as a mandatory social institution to their current understanding of marriage as a valuable relationship that requires both partners to show mutual appreciation and comprehension and personal compatibility. The educational system provided women with access to both theoretical knowledge and practical experiences which helped them acquire a more advanced understanding of human connections. Marriage exists as a life goal that people should pursue only after they identify their personal values and establish their capacity to enter into marriage.

5.2.1: Marriage as a Choice, not Obligation

People now understand marriage as a personal choice instead of an obligation which society expects of them. Higher education institutions now have increasing power to promote student independence because from university exposure, women's tend to focus on their personal development and career objectives.

One of the participant's response shows how marriage now serves as one of many life components which women can choose to include in their identity. The evidence shows people

now value women based on their personal achievements instead of their traditional marital standing.

“Marriage is just a part of life, not my entire identity.” (Age 25, BS Sociology)

The participant who spoke after the previous respondent showed that personal readiness should be considered more important than social expectations. The study results showed that participants experienced greater personal control because they could decide about marriage based on their own preferences instead of following societal demands.

“It should not be done because of any pressure, but when a person is ready.” (Age 24, Graduated)

One of the participant's response shows her resistance against societal pressure which expects women to marry at an early age. She chooses to pursue her personal goals and aspirations because she wants to establish her own path through life and develop her future.

“Society thinks girl should marry early, but I want to achieve my goals first.” (Age 26, Employed)

So these participant responses shows a shift toward personal freedom, autonomy and independent decision making.

5.2.2: Importance of Personal Qualities

Respect was one quality mentioned by participants as important when thinking about marriage.

Respect was considered one quality which is very critical and cannot be ignored during marriage.

Other qualities that were discussed include love, emotional maturity, and other qualities necessary for building good marital relationships.

A participant indicated that respect in marriage is something important to consider, since it is not negotiable. The emphasis on respect reveals that people now appreciate the need for equality in marriage.

“The most important thing in marriage is respect, I cannot compromise on respect.” (Age 25, MPhil Sociology)

Another respondent emphasized emotional maturity and empathy as the key attributes of the partner. It implies that there is a need for psychological compatibility and proper relationship management through proper thinking and emotions.

“A partner should be emotionally mature and understanding.” (Age 24, Graduated)

Another participant highlighted the significance of being kind and patient in forming a great relationship or marriage relationship. This shows how interpersonal behavior is considered an important factor in making a great relationship or marriage.

“Kindness and patience are very important in any relationship.” (Age 26, MPhil)

All of these responses point to the fact that personal qualities is given preferences over traditional criteria like caste, status or strict marriages.

5.2.3: Realistic understanding of Marriage & Communication

It shows that the participants have a more matured and realistic attitude towards marriage after experiencing it at the educational level. They no longer consider marriage to be just an idealized

one; instead, they regard it to be a relationship that demands responsibility, mutual understanding, and good communication skills.

A statement given by one of the participants reflects a mature attitude towards marriage because she views marriage as a responsibility rather than just a source of happiness. This shows a shift toward more practical perspective on marital life.

“Marriage is not only about happiness, it is about responsibilities.” (Age 25, Graduated)

Another participant emphasized the significance of handling differences and offering mutual support in the relationship. This indicates an awareness that challenges & difficulties are a natural part of marriage and requires cooperation and effort.

“Marriage is about managing differences and supporting each other.” (Age 24, Graduated)

Among one of the participants, it is evident how effective communication can play an important role in sustaining a good and healthy relationship. This indicates that effective communication is vital to avoid misunderstanding and strengthen the relationship among partners.

“Communication is very important in marriage to avoid misunderstandings.” (Age 26, MPhil)

So education changes the outlook on marriage from something traditional to more practical and meaningful.

5.3 Education shaped Partner Selection Criteria

This theme explains that higher education plays a crucial role in determining women’s expectations and criteria when selecting a marriage partner. The respondents noted that their higher education influenced the way they think. Instead of placing too much emphasis on caste,

social class, and other irrelevant characteristics, they were looking for a partner who had similar interests, respected, and was able to understand them.

Their higher education widened and broadened their vision and made them realize how important values and communication are to maintaining a happy marriage. Thus, the choice of a husband is no longer made on the basis of preferences of one's relatives but according to personal criteria and standards.

5.3.1: Preference for Educational Compatibility

The results show that there is a very strong preference on the part of the subjects towards those partners who possess the same level of education as the participants since it will be easier to communicate.

This can be seen from the response of one of the participant who says that education influences people's thinking in many ways. Therefore, when a person has a partner with the same level of education, it will be much easier for both to come to an agreement.

*“I want my spouse to be at least graduate because education shapes thinking.” (Age 24,
Graduated)*

One participant also mentioned the fact that if both people are educated, communication and problem-solving would become much easier. It is evident from the below statement that education helps in building problem-solving skills and facilitates communication between two individuals.

*“If both partners are educated, it become easier to discuss and solve life problems.” (Age 25,
MPhil)*

In addition to this, it indicates how education enables the partners to understand each other better. This shows how important it is for both individuals to have a common intellectual base.

Overall, these responses indicate the significance of education being considered as one of the most essential factors for building mutual understanding.

5.3.2: Importance of Intellectual Compatibility

The research findings demonstrate that participants in the study prefer partners who share their intellectual abilities because they want their partners to think independently while they maintain intellectual appreciation of their partner's abilities. The study participants preferred partners who could engage in meaningful conversations while they shared different opinions and made thoughtful choices about relationship matters.

The participant response showed that the respondent wanted a partner who could think for himself instead of following other opinions. The study shows the appreciation for critical thinking and individuality in relationships where intellectual depth seen as an important quality.

“I want a partner who has his own deep opinions and does not just follow others.” (Age 24, Graduated)

The intellectual awareness of the partner would make her capable of appreciating diverse perspectives. This shows that the intellectual compatibility plays an important role in effective communication and understanding.

“An intellectual partner can understand different perspectives.” (Age 26, MPhil)

Overall, it can be seen from these responses that people have started giving priority to intellectual compatibility in marriage for developing a successful bond.

5.3.3: Emotional Maturity and Respect

The findings shows that emotional maturity and respect have been identified as important considerations when selecting a partner. This implies that a potential partner should have skills that enable them to handle emotions well and be able to cope with situations while maintaining respect towards each other, an important requirement for sustaining relationships.

One respondent noted that respect and emotional maturity are the most significant attributes in a partner. This implies that apart from physical attributes, there are behavioral aspects that should be considered when initiating relationships.

“For me, the most important quality is respect and emotional maturity.” (Age 25, MPhil student)

Another respondent pointed out the necessity of a partner being able to deal with situations calmly. This shows that the partner must be able to cope with different situations and resolve any conflicts and maintain harmony between themselves.

“A partners should be able to handle situations calmly.” (Age 24, Employed)

So the above mentioned qualities are seen as important factor for maintaining a stable, balanced and successful marriage or relationships.

5.3.4: Rejection of Toxic or Dominating Behavior

This shows that higher education has made the participants more sensitive to such issues and they have become less tolerant to any relationship that is unhealthy and toxic. This is an

indication of increasing self-respect and awareness among individuals and they do not wish to tolerate any relationship that undermines their dignity and emotions.

One of the participants pointed out that marriage does not mean any sort of control or domination over another partner. This shows a rejection of old traditions, power imbalances in marriages, and more focuses on equality and mutual respect.

“Marriage should not be about controlling or dominating others, but it should be about mutual respect and equality.” (Age 24, Graduated)

Yet another respondent was quite resolute about not accepting any form of disrespect from her partner. This suggests increased sense of awareness and self-respect because the negative behavior is not tolerated in a relationship anymore.

“Now I cannot compromise on disrespect or any toxic behavior even in marriage or any relationship.” (Age 25, MPhil)

From the above responses, it can be concluded that awareness and self-respect were increasing.

In sum, this theme reflects how education results in more conscious partner choice and consideration of compatibility, mutual respect, and intellectual compatibility instead of tradition and dominance in relationships.

5.4 Career Aspirations, Financial Independence & Delayed Marriage

This theme highlights the impact that higher education has on women’s professional aspirations as well as their view towards marriage. Women pointed out that education drives them to give

priority to personal and professional development and financial stability before getting married or getting into any relationship.

Most women stated that they do not see marriage as something that should hinder their ambitions. Instead they want to establish themselves and achieve stability before considering marriage.

5.4.1: Career Prioritization over Early Marriage

Many participants highlighted this concept that they want to focus on their career and want to stable themselves before marriage.

“I want to become stable in my career before getting married.” (Age 24, Graduated)

One of the participants highlighted the fact that marriage is not something that bound you to stop growing, but one should be stable enough to support herself before getting into any marriage or relation.

“Marriage should not stop one’s personal growth.” (Age 26, MPhil)

5.4.2: Importance of Financial Stability

This shows that financial stability is viewed as a crucial element in personal life and partner selection. The reason is that participants recognize the importance of economic stability for securing their lives in the future. In the case of married life, it is necessary to share financial obligations between spouses.

As one of the participants pointed out, there is a social expectation for husbands to take care of the expenditures within the family, implying that financial stability is a key requirement when looking for a life partner.

“Financial stability is very important, society teaches us from childhood that the life partner is usually the one who will manage the household expenses. So it’s essential that he should be financially stable.” (Age 24, MPhil)

Other respondents pointed out that financial stability was the way towards having a secured life. This indicates a practical approach to marriage whereby it is viewed as important to be financially stable in order to have stability in one’s life.

“Financial stability is important for a secure and comfortable life.” (Age 25, Graduated)

The other participant was concerned about responsibility and supporting her family; hence, financial capability is included in the responsibility of a partner. This is because a partner should be able to actively meet family needs.

“A partner should be responsible and able to support the family.” (Age 26, MPhil)

Overall, these responses indicate that financial stability becomes an important element when selecting partners because it increases one’s life security and overall satisfaction.

5.4.3: Expectation of Spouse Support for Career

The significance of having a supportive partner was highly highlighted by the respondents. This is an indication of a shift towards valuing independence, which entails that women want their partners to enable them to grow professionally, even after marriage.

One of the respondent noted the importance of having a partner who gives her liberty to pursue her career despite family and societal expectations. This shows a desire for autonomy and freedom in pursuing career goals alongside marital life.

“I expect my partner to allow me to continue my work without any familial and societal pressure.” (Age 24, Graduated)

One more participant emphasized the importance of career support from their partners and stated that marriage does not have to do any interference with their careers. This suggests that women are moving away from societal expectations about marriage limiting their career development.

“My partner should support my career and not stop me.” (Age 25, MPhil)

Support from a partner is also seen as to boost confidence levels by another respondent, signifying the significance of encouragement in strengthening women's self-confidence and career motivation.

“Support from a partner increases confidence.” (Age 24, Employed)

Hence, this theme shows that higher education makes women more career-conscious, independent, and focused on self-development, thus resulting in postponement and careful consideration when it comes to making decisions about marriage.

5.5 Family Influence & Negotiated Autonomy

This theme examines the influence that the family had in shaping the decision to marry for university-educated women.

Although the vast majority of the respondents were said to have great freedom, but family continues to be an important element. However, unlike old traditions whereby the family is the sole decision maker, the findings seem to indicate a move towards more negotiated autonomy rather than controlling. The respondents do not discard the role of the family but redefined it into more supportive form. This indicates a transitional phase between traditional and modern decision making patterns.

5.5.1: Freedom with Family Support

Participants emphasized their right to select their life partners but their ability to exercise this right depended on their need for family support. Participants demonstrated a balanced relationship between their ability to make personal choices and their need for family support.

One participant expressed that she has full freedom to choose her partner. The statement shows how autonomous marriage decisions make it possible for people to decide their life paths.

“I have a full freedom to choose my life partner.” (Age 25, MPhil)

Another respondent expressed that she has full freedom to select her life partner, but she gives importance to her family’s will and support in this process.

“I have a freedom to choose partner, but my family supports and guides me.” (Age 24, Graduated)

The participant shows that she needs family support through her family guidance which she needs to make her life decisions. The statement reflects a balanced form of independence, where personal choice is exercised alongside family trust. The statement shows that educated women

create new family systems which enable them to maintain relationships with their families while still needing their families to support them.

5.5.2: Family Expectations (Education, Character, Caste)

The participants reported that their families maintain specific expectations which include educational requirements and character specifications and partner family background. The current trends show a shift in expectations which now prioritize respect and educational attainment instead of strict traditional criteria.

The participant response shows that her family demands that her future partner must be educated and having a well-mannered, good behavior. This situation demonstrates that people now expect different social standards which recognize personal qualities and educational qualifications as more important than traditional social boundaries.

“My family wants a decent and educated life partner for me.” (Age 25, MPhil, Employed)

The quote shows that traditional societal norms which include caste systems and fixed social structures have decreased in importance yet families still value their members who bring them honor through education. The participant is indicating that her family values qualities that align with her own preferences showing a intersection between personal and family expectations. The study shows that educational development has created progressive partner selection standards which affect both women and their families.

One participant response highlights that caste still remains important in certain families, such as Arain families, despite changing attitudes. The statement demonstrates how modern individuals desire personal freedom but face pressures to conform to established cultural norms.

“Yes, of course and 100%, this is Pakistani society, and for our family caste is too much important.” (Age 24, MPhil)

Education has decreased the significance of caste among participants except for Arain family members, for them caste is the primary criterion to select marriage partners.

5.5.3: Shared Decision-Making

Participants emphasized that marriage decision are often shared with family members because they value their decision. The cultural context shows that people make personal decisions which require their family members to provide input before they make final choices.

“The final decision about marriage would be shared with my family.” (Age 24, Graduated)

Most of the participants shared the same statement which highlights that decision-making is not entirely individualistic. The participant acknowledges her role in decision but also recognizes the importance of family involvement. Family approval holds emotional and social value in the decision-making process which reflects a cultural practice of collective decision-making.

The shared approach enables women to participate in the process which differs from traditional settings that restricted their decision-making power.

The theme shows that family influence still exists but now operates through supportive relationships that both family and the girl herself can negotiate. Educated women have autonomy to have her say in the decisions while maintaining strong family ties.

5.6 Societal Expectations & Marriage Pressure

This thematic finding shows how societal norms and expectations continue to shape people's decisions about marriage. The participants confirmed that social pressure exists in their lives especially for two areas marriage timing and peer and cousin comparisons with same age children. The participants showed that educational attainment has decreased their ability to make personal decisions based on these social pressures and these pressures no longer has any influence on them.

5.6.1: Indirect Social Pressure

Most of the participants felt some form of societal pressure indirectly, especially from their families and through social comparison. This is because societal pressures manifest themselves through daily interactions and social comparisons, which instill in people an obligation to fulfill certain requirements, leading to emotional stress. The participant feels uneasy about being judged according to other people's decisions and life choices.

“Relatives compare me with others who are already married.” (Age 25, Graduated)

This shows that societal pressures can be built through daily conversations and cultural beliefs.

5.6.2: Age Pressure

Many participants mentioned that there is a high level of societal belief regarding the 'appropriate' age to marry. They do not feel pressure from their immediate family members but from the wider family and society.

“Society believes that girl should marry at certain age.” (Age 24, Graduated)

This quote indicates that age-related expectations are firmly rooted in society's mentality. Here, the interviewee realizes that these expectations persist irrespective of their own personal aspirations, but these expectations no longer have any influence on her personal decision.

In addition to that, for another participant, the aspect of social pressures as well as the timing of getting married in relation to age was pointed out. The statement below indicates this, since the phrase “getting older” makes reference to this.

“You should get married now. You are becoming old.” (Age 26, MPhil)

It can therefore be concluded that despite these attitudes towards age expectations existing, their influence seems to be decreasing among educated women. It thus looks like education plays an important role in allowing women to resist these societal timelines and prioritize personal readiness.

5.6.3: Resistance to Pressure

Although recognizing social pressure, many respondents described their resistance and independence in the decision-making process.

“I am not going to marry under pressure, I want to achieve my goals first.” (Age 24, MPhil student)

The quote demonstrates self-determination through its content. The participant is rejecting societal expectations and prioritizing her personal goals. The participants also said that these societal expectations not matter for them much. The research demonstrates how educational opportunities have enabled women to confront and overcome social constraints which restrict them.

This theme overall shows that educated women face reduced control from societal expectations which still exist in society. Women now possess greater knowledge and self-assurance and they have gained the ability to withstand pressure which results in better autonomous decision-making.

5.7 Societal Perceptions and Stereotypes about Educated Women

The theme investigates how society views educated women who enter marriage relationships. Participants described both positive perception and negative stereotypes, showing a mixed and sometimes contradictory attitude toward educated women present in society.

5.7.1: Positive Perceptions

The results show that people consider education as a valuable asset which brings advantages to marriage because educational attainment proves responsibility and capability and awareness of life skills. The participants showed that people view educated women as better equipped to handle their personal and work obligations.

One of the participant said that people recognize educated women as responsible adults who possess skills needed for their work. The research findings show that education boosts marriage partners' trustworthiness and age-related maturity together with their marriage readiness.

“Educated women are seen as responsible and capable.” (Age 24, Graduated).

Another participant found that educated women can successfully balance their professional responsibilities with their family obligations. This belief shows that education enables women to handle multiple responsibilities through its educational training.

“Educated women can handle both career and family.” (Age 25, MPhil)

The response indicates that education functions as a beneficial quality for marriage because it demonstrates a person's capacity to handle obligations, awareness and their general understanding of things.

5.7.2: Negative Stereotypes

At the same time, participants reported negative stereotypes about educated women in society. Stereotypes about educated women depict them as people who show excessive independence and require demanding relationships which create difficulties for others in marriage. The ongoing evaluation of women's character and conduct by society shows how traditional gender norms still control modern society.

One participant reported that educated women are often considered "too choosy" and overly "independent" which shows that people sometimes perceive independence as a negative trait.

“People think educated women are too choosy and independent.” (Age 25, MPhil)

Another participant showed that people believe educated women will not adapt to marriage because they can't manage household properly and they doubt these women who marry will fulfill traditional marital responsibilities.

“Educated women will not adjust in marriage, she can't handle household things.” (Age 24, MPhil)

One of the participant expressed her feeling, she said that educated women are labeled by many names like they are “Too free or very self-directed” which often use in critical and harsh sense.

“Educated women are “AZAAD”, they have their own life.” (Age 25, MPhil)

Also, one participant mentioned extreme social stigmatization and the label of madness, where educated women are viewed as having “lost of their sense” due to overly educated.

“She stated, ‘inka to dimagh phir gya ha’ (hey have become too educated) (Age 25, MPhil)

And some of the respondents shared the very direct social comments, like they have so many demands, they have their own lives, they don’t compromise, they always fights, comments like that. She said that;

“People say educated women have too many demands, they think we don’t compromise.” (Age 25, MPhil)

The participants are pointing out that independence is often misinterpreted as arrogance and non-cooperation. This also shows that negative stereotypes still exist in society but they have less influence on educated women.

5.7.3: Limited Influence of Stereotypes

Despite these stereotypes, participants shared that such views do not strongly influence their decisions.

“These stereotypes exist, but they do not affect my decisions.” (Age 25, Graduated)

This shows resistance and confidence which the old traditional women don’t have. Because women learned this all from education. The participant acknowledges the existence of these stereotypes but reject their authority, also their impact is decreasing among educated women. It

reflect a shift toward more self-defined identities. Educated women are increasingly confident in defining their own paths.

5.8 Balancing Modern Values & Cultural Tradition

This theme highlights that participant emphasized maintaining a balance between modern and cultural tradition. It also shows that how participants navigate the relationship between modern values and traditional cultural expectations. Rather than rejecting, they aim to maintain a balance.

5.8.1: Respect for Cultural Tradition

This findings show that participants demonstrate their respect for cultural traditions while preserving their personal identities. The study results show that participants from different cultural backgrounds were able to balance their cultural values with their personal independence.

One participant expressed that she respects traditions but will not compromise her identity. The findings show that people value cultural norms but they consider personal identity and self-respect to be equally significant.

“I respect old traditions but I will not compromise my identity.” (Age 25, MPhil)

Another participant highlighted that traditions are an important part of identity and should be respected. This shows that cultural values create a powerful bond which people use to establish their social connections.

“Traditions are part of our identity and should be respected.” (Age 24, Graduated)

The statement shows that the participant values cultural traditions which she considers important. She acknowledges the importance of traditions in shaping identity and social belonging but will not compromise on her identity.

The participant prefers a balanced method which combines personal values with cultural norms instead of treating them as opposing forces. The statement demonstrates how educated women possess the ability to balance contemporary viewpoints with traditional societal demands through their adaptable skills.

“Balance is important between personal values and cultural norms.” (Age 26, MPhil)

Thus, participants create a balanced system which combines traditional practices with modernity to protect their cultural identity and their individual rights.

5.8.2: Importance of Personal Values & Independence

The findings show that while people consider traditions to be significant, they do not allow the traditions to limit their individual growth and development. This reflects the move towards self-independence as well.

“These traditions should not stop one’s personal growth.” (Age 25, Graduated)

This quote shows that while traditions are respected, they are not blindly followed, now as time have changed now, the participants is now asserting their rights to personal growth and independence rather than blindly follow old traditions.

5.9 Need for Societal Change and Advice for Women

This theme reflects participant's perspective on societal change and their advice for other women navigating marriage decisions. It shows that society needs to accept the reality & stop pressurizing women who are not married yet.

5.9.1: Need for Positive Attitude

One of the participant stated,

“Society should respect women choices.” (Age 25, Graduated)

This quote reflects a demand for social change. The participants is expressing that women's decisions should be accepted and valued by society without judgment or interference. It reflects a demand for respect, equality, and recognition of women's autonomy in making their own life decisions.

5.9.2: Reducing Judgment & Pressure

One of the respondent highlighted that

“Education should be seen as strength, not a problem.” (Age 24, Graduated)

This statement from the respondent highlights the frustration with negative social attitudes. The participant is advocating for a shift in a mindset of society where education is valued positively not seen as problem and stereotyping.

5.9.3: Advice to Women

Most of the participants had the same advice for girls. One of the respondent quoted,

*“Take time, be stable, & do not marry under pressure, your time will come.” (Age 25,
Graduated)*

This is the practical guidance that comes out of personal experience. The participant urges women to consider stability, self-realization, and independence prior to getting married.

This theme essentially emphasizes the need for change and empowerment in society. The respondent advocates for independence and thoughtful decision-making.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This paper has examined how higher education and societal expectations affect marriage decisions of university educated women in Lahore. The research, based on qualitative interviews, brings out the role of education in changing the views, decision making capacity and reaction to societal norms of women. The results indicate that there is a gradual shift of the traditional, family based marriage systems to more independent, considerate and negotiated decision making processes. Meanwhile, there are still societal expectations, but their impact seems to be decreasing among educated women. This can be explained using the concept of Feminist Theory, which claims that the decision-making process of women is conducted within the framework of the patriarchal system.

Among the most important finding of this research is the contribution of higher education in promoting personal growth and critical thinking among women. The participants always claimed to be more confident, aware and capable of making independent decisions. This align with the studies of (Kabeer, 1999; Farooq and Tabassum, 2022) who note that one of the main factors contributing to the empowerment of women is education, which allows them to break the traditional norms. Critical thinking skills will enable women to challenge social norms about marriage and make decisions that are more rational. This is in contrast to the traditional contexts where marriage choices are usually foisted upon people, educated women in this study showed a sense of self identity and independence.

Moreover, the results indicate that higher education has a significant influence on changing the perception of women on marriage. Marriage is not perceived as a mandatory life event anymore but as a personal choice that ought to be in accordance with personal readiness and compatibility.

This change is a result of more general social transformations with modernization and education, and (Giddens, 1992) explains that in contemporary societies, relationships are more founded on mutual satisfaction and emotional attachment than obligation. Respect, kindness, emotional maturity, and communication were some of the qualities highlighted by participants in this study, which points to a shift towards egalitarian and companionate marriage.

The other significant area that has been brought out in this study is the change of criteria of partner selection. Educated women were found to be very keen on intellectual match, common values, understanding and common goals rather than traditional expectations. Also the study highlights that educated women has a strong preference for educational compatibility, because equally educated partner will contribute to better communication and solving life problems. The findings confirms the notion that education does not only increase individual awareness but also expectations towards relationships and marriages. This is closely connected to the earlier studies that indicate that a higher level of education facilitates the preference to egalitarian relationship and intellectual compatibility (Schwartz and Han, 2014; Jejeebhoy, 2000). Education, as observed in earlier studies, helps to develop more discriminative and knowledgeable partner preferences, especially in women who desire equality and reciprocity in marital relationship. The intolerance of toxic or dominating behavior is also another sign of the greater awareness of personal rights and limits.

The research also shows that career aspirations and financial independence are increasingly becoming important in determining the choice of marriage. Most respondents noted that they wanted to attain professional stability before getting into marriage, and this was a change in dependency to self-reliance. This observation is consistent with the theory of marriage proposed by (Becker, 1964) which asserts that economic considerations are important in marriage. This

observation aligns with the existing literature that demonstrates that women who are financially independent have more freedom in choice of marriage and are less prone to marrying under pressure (Becker, 1964; Kabeer, 2018). But unlike in the traditional understanding, this analysis reveals that women are not merely looking at financial stability among partners but also working towards achieving their financial independence. This implies an effort to redefine gender roles in which women are seen as active contributors and not passive recipient.

Family influence is a key determinant in marriage despite these changes. But the character of this influence has changed. The negotiated autonomy concept which was witnessed in this study represents a balance between the individual choice and the family involvement. The participants indicated that they had the autonomy to make choices but they also considered the views and support of their family. This observation is in line with the earlier research that indicates that family is important in influencing the life decisions of women in collectivist societies such as Pakistan. Nevertheless, education, as explained in the literature, improves the agency and involvement of women in decision- making (Kabeer, 2011). Thus, this study demonstrates a transition to shared and participatory decision making in the families, instead of absolute independence.

Another aspect that was investigated in the study is that caste has a small and contextual role in marriage choices. Despite its significance being pointed out in the literature (Allendorf and Pandian, 2016; Schwartz and Han, 2014), caste was not a key factor to most participants, with compatibility, education, and mutual understanding being the main priorities. Nevertheless, caste was still more applicable to some communities especially in the families of Arain where preference of same caste was higher. This implies that although higher education has mitigated the effects of caste, it still exists selectively in certain cultural settings.

The other significant finding is associated with social pressure especially on the time of marriage. The participants also indicated that they were indirectly pressured by age expectations and social comparisons, which is an indication of the persistence of the societal norms. This aligns with the available literature that emphasizes the fact that even educated women have to contend with expectations about getting married and choosing a partner in time (Schwartz and Han, 2014; Jejeebhoy, 2000). Nevertheless, the respondents of this research showed that they were able to resist these pressures and focus on education, career aspirations, and personal readiness. It is a symptom of wider social transformation as women are more willing to postpone marriage in order to become personally developed and achieve their professional ambitions (Raymo, 2013; Grow and Van Bavel, 2022). The results also correspond to evidence on the national level that indicates that higher education is closely related to delayed marriage in Pakistan (NIPS & ICF, 2019).

Although positive, the research reveals that there are still stereotypes about educated women, including the fact that they are too independent or less adjustable, which is a marriageability penalty (Hu and Qian, 2022; Harknett et al., 2021). These stereotypes, however, do not have much influence on the choice of women. The respondents acknowledged these social perceptions but did not let them influence their decision-making, which is the sign of greater confidence and self-awareness. Concurrently higher education is important in empowering women through raising their awareness, independence and decision making (PMC, 2025; Ashraf, 2025).

The results also emphasize that educated women do not entirely reject cultural traditions but instead they follow a moderate stance between modern values and cultural demands. This indicates that though traditions are important to the participants as they form their identity, they do not permit them to limit their personal development and autonomy in decision making. This

equilibrium signifies a transitional social stage during which women are bargaining between tradition and modernity and this aligns with (Giddens, 1992). The concept of transformation of social relationships in contemporary societies, where people are eager to shape their life choices and keep social ties. The study on the whole demonstrates that although traditional influences are still present, they are becoming weaker and educated women are making more independent and informed marriage decisions.

The necessity of the change in the society is another significant point that comes out of the study. The respondents stressed that women should be respected by society and that they should not be pressured unnecessarily into marriage. Education should not be seen as a negative factor but rather as a strength and empowerment factor. This is indicative of an increasing consciousness among women of their rights and the value of independence, and is consistent with prior research, the concept of empowerment as the capability to make strategic decisions in life (Kabeer, N, 1999). The call to less judgment and more acceptance points to a change in more liberal social attitudes.

6.1 Limitations

- The research had a sample size limitation because the study used qualitative methods which restricted its ability to create generalizable findings. The research study provides detailed information about participant experiences but the findings remain restricted because they cannot be used to represent the entire population. Also there's limited time for data collection which may restricted to conduct extensive interviews and include diverse participants.

- The study involved university-educated women who had completed their degrees as participants, which limited the research results because they lacked evidence from uneducated and less educated women who experience different levels of independence and restrictions.
- The study focused only on women's perspectives so the viewpoints of men were not included which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of marriage dynamics.
- The study investigated significant themes related higher education and societal expectations and family preferences but factors like caste and religion and class power Dynamics were not explored in depth. The research requires additional study because marriage decisions in South Asian societies depend on these factors.
- Conclusively, these limitations highlight the importance of conducting further research that involves varied samples in order to achieve an enhanced comprehension of women's marriage decisions.

6.2 Conclusion & Implications

Researchers used a qualitative approach to study how education influences marriage decisions among university educated women. The study discovered that higher education transforms women's marriage decision-making through its impact on their perception of marriage and their personal preferences. The education enables participants to develop better decision-making abilities through improved self-assurance and understanding and critical thinking skills.

Women with education now regard marriage as an aspect of their lives while they pursue self-development and career advancement and personal identity formation. Most of the women

delayed marriage until they achieved stable readiness which demonstrated the strong impact of education on their life goals. Women who pursue higher education have developed their partner selection methods because they now value qualities such as mutual respect and emotional and intellectual compatibility and shared values more than traditional selection criteria.

The traditional influences of family expectations and societal norms still exist, but it has become more flexible because people now treat them as negotiable elements. Marriage decisions depend on family involvement, but families now share their decision-making power through consultative methods that enable women to participate in decisions about marriage. Women who have completed their education now understand societal expectations about them, but they respond to these expectations with less impact than before. Instead, they demonstrate confidence through their ability to focus on their personal objectives while preparing for future challenges. Most participants now view caste as less important for marriage, though it maintains significance among specific groups who belong to Arain families.

The research shows how education helps women achieve their empowerment and personal decision-making authority through increasing their capacity to make choices about their own life paths. The ability of women to make independent decisions about their lives serves as a vital element that helps society progress because women represent a large portion of the population.

The research shows that higher education is helping Pakistani society to reach a point where women can make their own marriage decisions without losing their cultural ties. The society needs to develop better attitudes toward educated women because this acceptance remains essential for building a progressive society.

The study indicates that policy makers and educational institutions need to work toward creating better higher education opportunities for women who live in rural and underserved areas. The community needs to learn about women education and decision making because this understanding will lead to better support for these areas. The society needs to challenge its existing stereotypes about educated women while creating a better understanding of their right to choose their marriage partners. The society needs to address these issues so that it can create a space where women have the power to determine their paths while preserving their important cultural ties.

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8. APPENDIX

Appendix 1

Information Sheet

Study Title: The Impact of Higher Education and Societal Expectations on Marriage Choices: A Qualitative Study of University Graduated Women in Lahore

Researcher: Kanzul Eman

Institution: Forman Christian College University (FCCU)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking part in this study. I am conducting a qualitative research project as a part of my MPhil thesis, at the department of Sociology, Forman Christian College university. The research investigates how university-educated women from Lahore make marriage decisions based on their education and the expectations of their society.

The research investigates how educational systems affect women's ability to make life decisions which selecting partners and determining when to get married based on their social and cultural expectations. The research findings will help people understand how education lead to changes in women's personal relationships and marriage related decisions in Pakistani society.

If you agree to participate, you will be invited to **30-45 minutes semi structured interview** about your experiences and views on how education and societal expectations influence marriage decisions. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded for research purpose only.

Participation is **voluntary**, and you may skip any question or withdraw at any time without any consequence. All information will remain **confidential**, and your name will not appear in any report. Data will be used only for academic purposes.

There is no known risk to participating. While there may be no direct personal benefit, your insights will help improve understanding of how higher education affects women's autonomy and marriage choices in Pakistan.

If it makes you uncomfortable and if you require further clarification, please feel free to contact me at 263199568@formanite.fccollege.edu.pk.

Consent Letter

Dear Participant,

I am Kanzul Eman and I am conducting a research study for my thesis paper "The impact of higher education and societal expectations on marriage choices: A Qualitative Study of University Graduated Women in Lahore" I am writing to invite you to take part in this study, which seeks to examine the impact of higher education and societal expectations on marriage choices specifically of university graduated women.

While participating in this study, you will have the chance to share your experiences and understandings of how higher education and societal expectations influence marriage choices. Your contributions will assist in understanding the barriers and opportunities, university graduated women experience in marriage choices as well as to help inform potential policies that encourage women's autonomy and equality.

There are no anticipated risks to you for participating in this study. Participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequence. Your identity will be protected, and personal information will not be identified in any reports from this study.

Please indicate your consent below:

I have read the above information and agree to participate

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Sincerely,

Kanzul Eman

Appendix 2

Questionnaire

Section A: Demographic Profile

1. Age:
2. Highest qualification obtained:
3. Current employment status:
4. Family structure (nuclear/joint/extended):
5. Parents' education level:
6. Socio-economic background (self-described):

Section B: Educational Journey and Personal Development

1. Can you describe your educational journey and what higher education has meant to you personally?

- How did university life shape your thinking?
 - Did it change your views about relationships or marriage?
 - Did relationships or marriage (decisions/ discussions) influence your career goals?
 - Did education influence your career goals?
2. In what ways do you think your education has influenced your expectations from a life partner?
 - What educational level do you expect your spouse to have, and why is this important to you?
 - How important is financial stability in a life partner for you? Why?
 - How important is religious outlook in your expectations of a partner?
 - Do you expect your spouse to support your career? In what ways?
 3. Do you think you would have different marriage expectations if you were not university educated? Why or why not?
 4. Has higher education increased/decreased your confidence in making independent decisions? In what ways?

Section C: Criteria for Spouse Selection

What qualities do you consider most important in selecting a marriage partner?

- How important is the profession of your potential spouse in your decision?
 - Is it important for you that your spouse have similar educational status? Why?
 - How much does family background matter to you when selecting a partner?
 - How do you define compatibility in marriage, and how important is it for you?
2. Do you think your education has made you more selective? If yes then in what ways?

Section D: Societal and Familial Expectations

1. What expectations does your family have regarding your marriage?
 - Does your family have specific expectations regarding the timing or age of your marriage?
 - Does your family prefer a particular caste, class, or community for your marriage?
 - Does your family expect a certain educational level for your future husband?
 - Does your family prefer a specific type of family background (joint, nuclear, number of siblings, etc.)?
2. Have you ever felt pressure from your family and society to get married? Can you describe that experience?
3. How do society view educated women in marriage?
4. Have you encountered stereotypes about educated women? If yes then what kind?
5. How do community traditions or expectations influence marriage decisions in your social circle?

Section E: Personal Autonomy and Decision-Making

1. How much freedom do you feel you have in choosing your marriage partner?
 - (Final decision yours or shared) Do you feel that the final decision about marriage would be yours, or would it be shared with your family?
 - (Emotional pressure) Have you experienced any emotional pressure related to marriage decisions? If yes, can you explain?
2. How do you negotiate disagreements about marriage decisions?

3. Do you believe higher education strengthens women's agency in marriage decisions?
How?

Section F: Modern Aspirations vs Traditional Norms

1. Do you experience any tension between your career aspirations and traditional marital expectations?
2. Do you think society treats educated women differently in marriage negotiations? How?
3. How do you balance modern values and cultural traditions?

Section G: Reflection and Suggestions

1. What changes do you think are needed in society regarding educated women and marriage?
2. What advice would you give to other university educated women navigating marriage decisions?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share?