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**THE IMPACT OF PATRIARCHAL NORMS ON GENDER
EQUALITY IN PAKISTAN: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This study explores the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms on gender equality in Pakistan, employing a sociological lens to analyze the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that perpetuate gender disparities. Patriarchal systems in Pakistan are deeply entrenched in societal values, traditions, and religious interpretations, which often prioritize male dominance and restrict women's autonomy. The research investigates how these norms manifest in various spheres, including education, employment, political participation, and domestic life, and how they contribute to systemic gender inequality. Using qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies, the study examines the lived experiences of women and marginalized genders in both urban and rural contexts. It highlights the role of cultural practices such as honor codes, early marriages, and restricted mobility in reinforcing gender hierarchies. Additionally, the research evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and policies aimed at promoting gender equality, such as women's rights legislation and gender quotas, and identifies gaps in their implementation due to patriarchal resistance. The findings reveal that while there have been incremental advancements in gender equality, patriarchal norms continue to hinder progress by normalizing gender-based discrimination and violence. The study concludes with recommendations

for transformative interventions, including community-based awareness campaigns, educational reforms, and the empowerment of women through economic and political participation. By addressing the root causes of patriarchal dominance, this research contributes to the broader discourse on achieving gender equality in Pakistan and similar socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Gender Equality, Pakistan, Sociological Perspective, Cultural Norms, Women's Rights, Gender-Based Discrimination, Structural Barriers, Legal Frameworks, Empowerment*

Introduction

Patriarchal norms are pervasive in South Asia; for example, in Pakistan, they can be linked to Islam but are more deeply entrenched in the pre-Islamic and regional cultural practices of Indian, Afghan, and Persian empires of the past (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). In all South Asian countries, these norms determine work and life for the vast majority of women. In Pakistan for example, the overwhelming majority of women live with their husband's family and husbands are usually chosen by their family. These customs are maintained by women themselves, as actors, agents and nurturers of these norms. This case study focuses on the role of the family, especially the biraderi, but also the role of individual women. It provides a way to understand how gender norms are maintained, reshaped and changed. It also shows how women can be nurturers and agents of conservatism but also how some can resist and actively work for change.

At tertiary level, there exists an equal number of boys and girls attending school, yet for boys, the ultimate goal tends to be securing a job, while for numerous girls, the primary focus often shifts toward the expectation of marriage. Consequently, in situations where there is an economic scarcity of jobs available, society typically anticipates that girls will step aside, allowing boys to take precedence. Interestingly, as education levels rise, girls find themselves being viewed as less marriageable and increasingly prepared for the workforce (Lowe et al.2022). Over time, research has consistently shown, alongside some anecdotal evidence, that women frequently prioritize the needs of others, often compromising their own desires and ambitions for the sake of family responsibilities and welfare. In contrast, it appears that men are generally more inclined to impose their own needs and desires onto those around them, reflecting a noticeable difference in societal expectations and individual priorities.

Understanding Patriarchy and Gender

Pakistan is an overwhelmingly Muslim-majority country where Islam is firmly established as its official state religion. It is recognized as a conservative nation characterized by a deeply entrenched patriarchal system. This system is vividly reflected in local traditions and cultural values that play a significant role in shaping gender dynamics across society. The patriarchal structures firmly sustain their power and authority by controlling the lives and choices of women (Ahmad et al.2023). This control is manifested through the institutionalization of spatial segregation, a strict differentiation in gender roles, and the enforcement of restrictive gender norms.

Male actors, wielding societal power, effectively craft institutionalized frameworks that serve to establish and perpetuate dominance and supremacy of men over women. A key element within this system is the concept of purdah, which demands that women internalize specific behaviors and traits associated with modesty, submissiveness, and an ideal of femininity that necessitates looking good while simultaneously avoiding any actions that might draw attention to themselves (Maake & Smuts, 2024). By focusing on the experiences of women as agents of change, it becomes evident how various underlying power structures of everyday life are negotiated and challenged.

In an effort to contribute to a deeper understanding of these complexities, research interviews are conducted with middle-class women in Pakistan. These interviews aim to elucidate the nuanced resistance strategies employed by these women and bring to light their efforts to shape and reproduce gender ideologies within a context where dominant conservative patriarchal norms prevail. The emphasis is placed on how these women actively (re)negotiate and (re)construct gender norms, roles, and relationships, particularly in the vital spheres of education and the workforce.

Through their acts of resistance, these women effectively destabilize paternal control by stepping into traditionally male spaces for both work and study. In doing so, they challenge the traditional dynamics of male-headed households, established customary rules, gendered workplace policies, and the prevalent power imbalances tied to gender. However, such acts of defiance are not without risks; they may lead to the potential for violence, social rejection, discrimination, and isolation imposed by patriarchal male figures (Prattes, 2022).

Furthermore, the ways in which women shape and influence gender ideologies illustrate how the practice of purdah can be

(re)produced. It serves several functions such as acting as (1) a security and trust-building mechanism that safeguards the sanctity and integrity of the family unit, (2) a means of protection against the imposition of restrictive societal norms, and (3) an obstacle to the rejection of male relatives from medically relevant spaces within the public domain of local hospitals, thus highlighting the multifaceted nature of women's experiences in a conservative setting (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022).

Historical and Cultural Context of Patriarchy in Pakistan

Pakistan is an overwhelmingly Muslim-majority country, firmly establishing Islam as its official state religion. It is widely recognized as a conservative nation, and its deeply rooted patriarchal system is vividly mirrored in local traditions, societal norms, and cultural values that exert a significant influence on male and female dynamics. This socially constructed institution of patriarchy arises from the hegemonic framework that shapes gender relations, condition-specific power dynamics, an ongoing resistance to social change, and the prevailing male exercise of control and dominance. Patriarchal systems maintain their grip on power and control over women's lives and choices through institutionalized segregation of spheres, a strict differentiation of gender roles, and a relentless maintenance of restrictive norms governing masculinity and femininity (Patgiri, 2022). In such patriarchal societies, there tends to be a pronounced effort to control women's sexuality, leading to the commodification of women and their bodies, often accompanied by a disturbing prevalence of domestic and interpersonal violence.

The hierarchical construction of gender within these societies further assigns intrinsic value, respect, and power to manhood and masculinity, while simultaneously devaluing women, thus fostering a pervasive atmosphere of misogyny and sexism directed towards women. The durability of the patriarchal system can be attributed in part to the complicity of women who may accept the dominance of men, often in exchange for both protection and economic support, especially given the relatively limited access women have to essential resources such as income, property, and education. (Phillips & Rogers, 2021) In South Asia, the complexities of patriarchal societies are intensified by additional social distinctions, such as caste and class, and they typically adhere to a system where women relatives are expected to receive care and support within the husband's family this is known as patrilocality. It is also well-documented that stricter structures of

patriarchy devise various strategies designed to control the movement and work of women, thereby maintaining household segregation and reinforcing male authority.

Similarly, in countries like Pakistan, one can observe the ongoing practice of bride exchange, which is motivated in part by the necessity to uphold patriarchal governance over women's bodies and their mobility. Nevertheless, unique circumstances and opportunities for addressing and capitalizing on status discrepancies across gender and class dynamics emerge, prompting the evolution of strategies aimed at reforming patriarchy from within its own established order (Mutunami). Some of the potential processes involved in this reform include the subversion of traditional masculine norms, the emergence of relative social mobility along with bargaining for respect across male and female dignity, and a concerted effort to redefine masculinity itself in the context of changing social dynamics. Overall, these transformations could lead to a shift in the patriarchal paradigm, paving the way for more equitable gender relations.

Gender Inequality Indicators in Pakistan

The causes of gender inequality are deeply rooted in a variety of norms, customs, traditions and conventions at the national, local, or household level. Consequently, the removal of these norms or traditions requires the lion's share of time. This does not, however, suggest that nothing can be achieved in this regard in the short run. For example, mores, norms and traditions that are essentially in the form of stereotype beliefs as well as religious orthodoxy could have punitive measures, like restrictive laws to check their enforcement in order to reduce gender inequality. Also, desired norms or customs could be promoted to mitigate the resulting inequitable impact of negative norms (Dahal et al., 2022). Such promotion efforts could include, among other things, new regulations to ban customary practices that together with social discrimination create an inferior status of woman. Furthermore, to sustain the positive impact of desired norms, reforms should be carried out in the legal system or laws. The removal of these norms in turn is contingent upon the broadening of political democracy with the extension of civil liberties and the extension of education, and political awareness, especially to the female portions of the population. Social political and legal action should be taken to challenge the reinforcement and reproduction of norms that perpetuate discriminations against woman (Moheyuddin, 2005).

Impact of Patriarchal Norms on Women's Rights

Women in Pakistan are guaranteed legal rights in many aspects of social, political, economic, and legal life. On the surface, these provisions seem to suggest that Pakistani women enjoy equal rights with men. However, in reality, Pakistani women suffer from stark gender inequality in all of these areas, largely due to the existence of deeply entrenched patriarchal social norms. These societal norms keep women down in their right to work; they are unable to access the same pay or status as men in various professions, often facing wage discrimination that prevents them from receiving the compensation they rightly deserve (Majid & Siegmann, 2021). Moreover, they are not given equitable opportunities for promotion in the workplace; many remain stuck in lower-level positions despite their qualifications and experience.

Furthermore, women are often not allowed to participate in the leading political or economic institutions of the country, which limits their ability to influence decisions that affect their lives and futures. They do not have the same level of access to, or control over, economic investments, which creates systemic barriers that hinder their economic empowerment. Available data reveals a troubling trend of differential male and female access to rights, social services, and both security and procedural laws in these contexts. Most importantly, this differential access is non-neutral and heavily skewed, resulting in reduced opportunities and rights for women.

Legal inequality further reinforces and perpetuates the already restricted access that women have to the material and human resources necessary for development and the acquisition of other rights. This creates a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break. On the contrary, there is a well-recognized reciprocal relationship between law and the economy, whereby the law directly shapes the distribution of resources and thus defines who has power over them, generating an excess of patriarchy in the process (Gaddis et al.2022).

In developing countries like Pakistan, unequal access to resources tends to be highly gendered, manifesting itself in various ways that disproportionately affect women. As a result, the laws and legal structures that govern these resources including property, marital, and inheritance laws are often skewed against women. In such countries, the presence of discriminatory laws and customary practices exacerbates women's vulnerability and significantly limits their potential to deploy their labor or resources equally. This lack of equity and access ultimately thwarts both individual and

collective development within society, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

Challenges and Barriers to Gender Equality in Pakistan

The situation has reached an alarming low and limited education and training minify her health and nutrition which result in nonparticipation in decision-making process, affecting her quality of life and economic efficiency. And she is invariably denied access to resources, which can break this fixed mould and have only very conservative and tradition bound society where customs, conventions and traditional role assignment inhibit any movement against the embedded interest and those having powers and privileges want to guard it at all cost (Moheyuddin, 2005). Women are considered inferior and die shaft of gender unjust treatment is the norm in the society and in the state of Pakistan one of the few states in the world which still finds itself in the classification of “Low” in the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). Union list is regarded as a country with low human development as gender inequality depict high development. The assessment of the gender issue in Pakistan and a review of major sectors depicting gender inequalities is essential to understand the present situation.

Pakistan comes in the very low category of Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), and reflects its poorest record in the South Asian region. The causes of gender inequality are manifold but the root lies principally in the household decisions which are largely Socialized and molded by traditions, customs, institutional and cultural norms. In many backward countries including Pakistan boys are preferred on the basis of their inherent physiological superiority, the forward-looking parents may also have the strength of resource expectation from the grown up son (Rashid, 2025). However this wished future has been the outcome of an inequitable distribution of resources against the female children. Different system in a country like Pakistan are also responsible of reinforcing the traditional trends; hence the bigotry in house resource allocation and expenditure has increased weight and influence of some of the sordid cultural norms. Women being the oppressed and subjugated class of the society are the main victim of these cultural mores and they, in almost all the cases, are its staunchest supporters.

Movements and Initiatives for Gender Equality

Throughout history, gender equality and the women's rights movement have faced significant challenges along with some notable successes. Although in the past clandestine strategies have

been employed to make voices be heard, like the French women's radical actions or the British suffragettes, the necessity was recognized for a sustainable and long-term strategy to fight for women's rights and since then, the women's right movements and initiatives have been respecting Gandhian policies concerning non-violent resistance (Tanwir et al., 2019). Although the strategies forward can be diverse, the goal is to challenge the idea of women's 'natural' or 'inferior' roles and abilities, reveal a pervasive environment of abuse, or simply provide women with a platform to voice complaints. This approach is centered on understanding how gender ideologies and beliefs about women's 'proper roles' in society are resisted, reproduced or transformed within everyday life events surrounding family and work life among urban women in this Pakistan. Although the family and workplace might appear as distinct domains, they are interconnected in the ways they influence women's lives and prospects. For instance, in Global South, formal education is a precondition for acquisition of successful careers, and a woman's access to formal education depends significantly on the ideologies of her family regarding women's education. Masculinity and femininity are socially constructed by norms addressing what is perceived as appropriate behavior and roles for each sex. This perception is reflected not only in the beliefs about, but also in the expectations of, what is 'right' for women and men. The societal expectations of this 'proper gendered behavior' range from girls' expected docility and domesticity to prohibitions on women's mobility to outside the home, and are enforced by symbols and practices described as 'honor'.

8. Future Directions and Recommendations

The family is widely recognized as the fundamental institution where gender ideologies are effectively passed down from one generation to another. It is within the familial setting that the beliefs surrounding gender norms and the socially constructed notions of appropriate gender roles are adopted and sustained. In light of this, it is predominantly at home that a girl learns what is deemed right behavior, the essence of modesty, the importance of compliance, and the necessity of prioritizing the needs and desires of others in the family over her own personal aspirations. Consistently, it is in the domestic environment that a young woman receives the strongest messages reinforcing that her primary responsibilities in life involve managing household affairs, caring for her siblings, and ensuring her in-laws' interests and

expectations are met (Lomazzi, 2023). Consequently, this process of spatial segregation and socialization profoundly makes it difficult for women to step beyond the constricted boundaries of the private realm and assert their rights in the public sphere assuming they are even aware of such rights to begin with.

The workplace is generally deemed as the territory where work, characterized as activities involving the exertion of mental or physical effort in exchange for remuneration, takes place. Furthermore, it is also at work where the potential exists for a woman to actively challenge and transform the traditional gender ideologies that impose restrictive gender norms and gendered beliefs concerning the appropriateness of various forms of employment and the specific types of jobs perceived as suitable for women. It is widely acknowledged that the successful pursuit of professional careers is fundamentally underpinned (Sisson, 2021) by the attainment of formal education. Consequently, to effectively tackle the shortage of well-paying jobs and sustainable careers accessible to women, it becomes crucial to address the effects of deeply ingrained ideological beliefs surrounding women's education, as well as the underlying factors that govern the adoption and evolution of these beliefs within society. This highlights the core aim of the investigation proposed by the study.

Conclusion

Pakistan came into existence in 1947 and located in South Asia. It was formerly a British colony and it is a country recognized for the gendered image of its national dress, the Shalwar Kameez, an overwhelmingly Muslim-majority country with Islam as its official state religion. It has the second highest population in the Muslim world. Often identified as conservative, Pakistan's patriarchal system strongly influences gender dynamics in society. Despite being a diverse nation with a large number of different ethnic groups, it is possible to discern the ways in which a rigid system of patriarchal control has been consolidated as a means of controlling women. Much has been written on Pakistan as a conservative Muslim society where strong adherence to patriarchal norms govern female behavior, the roles assigned to women and the "proper" ways that femininity is portrayed and performed in public life.

However, many of these critiques remain at the level of superficial analysis often failing to grapple with the complex inter-connectivity between tradition, culture, politics, and identity construction (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). In Pakistan, patriarchy

takes various forms, whereby the state, politicians, religious leaders and even the common person may use tradition and religion as a justification for their ideas and practices, which in turn are often used to subjugate women. Or to put it another way, religion, custom, and morality are used to force women back into a structurally subordinate role. In order to give private and public power over the lives and choices of women, patriarchal systems are maintained through institutionalization of the segregation of spheres, strict differentiation of gender roles and imposition of restrictive gendered norms.

The control of social life for women between private and public spheres is embodied in purdah which signifies a culturally exemplary practice in Pakistan widely seen as a sign of human decency, ultra-piety, honor, duty and religious responsibilities. The idea of purdah shares the common root word pardah which means “a curtain” or “a veil” and functions on the idea of space, confinement and enclosure. Although the literal meaning of purdah is the physical separation of men and women, it is a moral injunction regulating strict gender asymmetry and assignment of different norms and behaviors to each sex. There are myriad historical, social, religious, cultural, political and regional factors that conspire to perpetuate patriarchal norms and the imposition of a set of strictly gendered norms in Pakistan.

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