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Navigating Marriage Expectations: A Qualitative Study of Lived ExperiencesAmong Unmarried Women in Pakistan

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Abstract

Background

Marriage is a socially significant institution in Pakistan, where women are often expected to marry within a culturally defined age range. Despite increasing shifts toward delayed marriage, expectations remain deeply embedded. This study explores the lived experiences of unmarried women aged 25–49 years in Pakistan and how they perceive and navigate societal expectations surrounding marriage.

Methods

A qualitative exploratory design was used. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 unmarried women aged 25–49 years, recruited through purposive sampling. Data were collected between May and August 2024 using semi-structured interviews conducted either online or in person. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. An inductive thematic analysis approach was applied, with coding conducted independently by four reviewers to ensure analytical rigor.

Results

Marriage expectations were described as persistent and normalized within everyday interactions. Six themes emerged: internalization of expectations, stigma and social judgment, emotional burden, social withdrawal, influence on decision-making, and coping strategies. Participants reported increased questioning and comparison with age, often leading to self-doubt, stress, and overthinking. Some adopted avoidance strategies to limit exposure to uncomfortable conversations. Expectations also influenced decisions related to education, career, and future planning. Support from family and friends played a key role in helping participants manage these experiences.

Conclusion

Marriage expectations remain a central aspect of unmarried women's lives in Pakistan. These expectations shape emotional experiences and life decisions, while supportive relationships help women navigate these challenges.

Introduction

Marriage is a key social institution shaped by cultural norms and social expectations. Norms strongly influence how individuals decide when, with whom, and how to marry. (Allendorf & Thornton, 2015)In many societies, marriage is considered a marker of maturity, social responsibility, and achievement for women. However, in recent decades, women's life priorities have shifted, with increasing emphasis on

education and career development, leading to delayed marriage. (Cherlin, 2010) According to research, women are frequently subjected to more rigorous standards for honor, modesty, and forms. To fulfill socially acceptable responsibilities, people are expected to adhere to cultural norms that determine a "appropriate" period for marriage. (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019) lacks appropriate engagement that subsequently limits their freedom to choose a mate of their choosing. Common mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, which affect about one in three individuals, are more likely to harm women than males and greatly increase the burden of disease worldwide. (John et al., 2023)

Marriage patterns have gradually changed globally, with more women delaying marriage as a result of increased educational attainment, shifting priorities in their lives, and career aspirations.(Cherlin, 2010) Even with these changes, marital expectations still exist, especially in collectivist societies where personal choices are heavily influenced by family and communal beliefs.(Gerry Mackie et al., 2015) Qualitative research in a number of settings has shown that women frequently negotiate complicated marriage-related expectations, striking a balance between their own aspirations and cultural standards that are upheld by social settings and familial relationships.(Kohrt et al., 2014)

Marriage is seen as both a social expectation and a personal choice in many societies, especially in South Asia, especially for women.((Allendorf & Thornton, 2015) Marriage expectations are strongly associated with ideas of gender roles, reproductive obligations, and family honor.(Schuler et al., 2010) Due to highly rooted cultural expectations, women who do not marry within socially acceptable age ranges might experience inquiries, comparisons, and unsolicited advice.(Cislaghi & Heise, 2019) Expectations are a constant and accepted aspect of women's lived experiences since they are frequently conveyed through regular contacts.(Sripad et al., 2024)

Marriage continues to be very important in Pakistani culture and society. Women are generally expected to marry in their early to mid-twenties, and deviations from this norm may lead to increased attention from family members and society (Institute of Population Studies - NIPS, 2019) Traditional expectations continue to have an influence even when recent societal changes, such as greater access to work and education, have led to changes in the time of marriages.(Mumtaz & Salway, 2007) Because of this, a lot of single women have to deal with a situation where their own goals coexist with persistent social norms surrounding marriage.

There is little qualitative research that focuses explicitly on how unmarried women perceive and understand marriage-related expectations, even though previous literature has examined more general gender norms and family structures in Pakistan. (John et al., 2023) is crucial to comprehend these lived experiences since these expectations may subtly but significantly influence women's emotional health, social relationships, and life choices. ((Alam et al., 2026)

This study is conceptually informed by social norms and gender frameworks, which suggest that societal expectations are shaped and reinforced through everyday interactions and cultural practices. These perspectives guided the interpretation of participants’ narratives and the development of themes.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of unmarried women aged 25–49 years in Pakistan, focusing on how they perceive and navigate societal expectations surrounding marriage.

Methods

Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of unmarried women regarding societal pressure to get married and how this pressure influences their mental well-being, particularly in relation to anxiety and depression. An inductive approach was used to allow themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives rather than being predetermined. This approach was considered appropriate as it enabled an in-depth exploration of personal, social, and cultural dimensions of the issue within the Pakistani context. The study utilized thematic analysis as the guiding analytical framework, allowing for the identification of patterns, meanings, and shared experiences across participants. The qualitative design helped capture nuances in emotions, coping mechanisms, and social interactions that are often not fully understood through quantitative methods.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Pakistan, with participants recruited through a web-based approach and interviews conducted either online or in person based on participant convenience. The use of online platforms allowed inclusion of participants from different regions, while in-person interviews provided an opportunity for deeper engagement where feasible. Interviews were carried out in private and comfortable settings, either through secure online platforms such as Zoom or at locations chosen by participants to ensure confidentiality and ease of expression. This flexibility in data collection helped participants speak openly about sensitive experiences related to societal expectations and mental health.

Participants

The study included unmarried women aged 25–49 years residing in Pakistan. This group was selected because it represents a stage in life where societal expectations regarding marriage are often most pronounced. Women within this age range frequently experience pressure from family members, relatives, and broader social networks, making them particularly relevant for exploring the research question. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique, which allowed the selection of individuals who could provide rich and meaningful insights into the topic. Women who expressed willingness to share their experiences and met the eligibility criteria were invited to participate. A total of 12 participants were included in the study. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or perspectives were emerging from the interviews. The participants came

from varied educational and professional backgrounds, which allowed for diverse perspectives on societal pressure and its impact.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs). An interview guide was developed to explore key areas including societal expectations around marriage, personal experiences of pressure, emotional and psychological responses, coping strategies, and the influence of these pressures on daily life and decision-making. Participants were initially approached through an online platform and were provided with a consent form via Google Forms, where they indicated their willingness to participate. Those who agreed were contacted to schedule interviews at a time convenient for them. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, with a total interview duration of around 720 minutes (12 hours). All interviews were conducted in either Urdu or English based on participant comfort. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed verbatim. Care was taken to remove any identifying information from the transcripts to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis:

The collected data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data and to understand the depth of participants' experiences. Meaningful segments of text were then identified and labeled with initial codes.

The coding process was carried out by four independent reviewers, which helped improve the credibility and consistency of the analysis. Each reviewer coded the data separately, and regular discussions were held to compare codes, resolve differences, and reach consensus. This collaborative process ensured that the findings were not biased by a single perspective and reflected a more comprehensive understanding of the data.

The codes were then grouped into broader categories based on similarities and patterns. These categories were further refined into sub-themes and main themes, which captured the key aspects of participants' experiences related to societal pressure and mental well-being.

An iterative process was followed throughout the analysis, where the researchers moved back and forth between the data and emerging themes to ensure that the findings accurately represented participants' narratives. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and managing the data during the analysis process.

Participant quotations were used to support the themes and provide deeper insight into the findings. This approach ensured that the results remained grounded in the participants' own words and

experiences while maintaining analytical rigor.

Results

Participant Characteristics

A total of 12 unmarried women aged between 25 and 49 years participated in the in-depth interviews. Participants came from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, with most having completed higher education and actively engaged in careers or further studies. The majority were urban residents, reflecting the web-based recruitment strategy. Participants reported varying levels of societal pressure depending on their age and life stage. Women in their mid-to-late 20s described the onset of expectations, often beginning after completing their education, whereas women in their 30s and 40s reported persistent and intensified pressure, frequently accompanied by social judgment and stigma. Across all age groups, family members, extended relatives, and social gatherings were identified as primary sources of pressure. Despite differences in intensity, societal expectations regarding marriage were consistently described as a central and unavoidable aspect of participants' lived experiences.

Internalization of Societal Expectations

Participants consistently described how expectations surrounding marriage were not only externally imposed but gradually internalized over time. These expectations were embedded in routine conversations, social interactions, and cultural norms, making them feel natural and inevitable.

For many women, the pressure began subtly after completing education. One participant shared:

"After completing studies, people start saying now it's time to settle down." (Participant, 25 years)

As women grew older, these expectations became more persistent and direct. A participant explained:

"After 25, no one leaves you alone. Everyone keeps asking about marriage." (Participant, 32 years)

Another participant reflected on how this continued into later years:

"Even now, at this age, people still ask why I am not married yet." (Participant, 38 years)

Over time, repeated exposure to such messaging led many participants to internalize these expectations, influencing how they evaluated their own life progress. Even those who initially resisted societal norms acknowledged that these pressures eventually affected their thinking. As one participant noted:

"Even if you try not to think about it, somewhere it stays in your mind." (Participant, 34 years)

This internalization highlights how societal norms operate not only through direct pressure but also through subtle, continuous reinforcement.

Stigma and Social Judgment

Participants described experiencing various forms of stigma associated with being unmarried, particularly as they aged beyond socially expected timelines. Their marital status was often prioritized over their personal, educational, or professional achievements.

One participant expressed frustration at this constant evaluation:

"No matter how much you achieve, if you haven't married, that question always remains." (Participant, 27 years)

Another participant described how aging intensified judgment:

"People say you are getting older and won't find a good match." (Participant, 35 years)

For older participants, stigma became more pronounced and, at times, more subtle but deeply hurtful. One participant shared:

"At this age, people don't say it directly, but you can feel it… like something is wrong." (Participant, 44 years)

Participants also reported being subject to assumptions about their personality, standards, or life choices. One participant noted:

"They think maybe your expectations are too high or something is wrong with you." (Participant, 30 years)

These experiences reflect how societal norms shape perceptions of unmarried women, often leading to labeling and marginalization.

Psychological Distress and Emotional Burden

A central finding across interviews was the emotional and psychological impact of societal expectations. Participants described experiencing anxiety, stress, and self-doubt, often triggered by repeated questioning and comparison with peers.

One participant shared how these pressures affected her mental state:

"Sometimes I can't sleep at night because I keep thinking I am not getting younger." (Participant, 29 years)

Another participant explained the emotional impact more broadly:

"It makes you feel like something is missing or wrong with you." (Participant, 31 years)

Participants also described how attending weddings or social gatherings intensified these feelings:

"When others get married, you start thinking about your own life and feel behind." (Participant, 33 years)

For some, the impact accumulated over time. A participant in her late 40s reflected:

"Over time, these comments stay with you and affect how you feel about yourself." (Participant, 47 years)

While not all participants described severe distress, many acknowledged experiencing periodic emotional strain, especially during significant social events or life transitions. These findings highlight how societal expectations can contribute to ongoing psychological burden.

Social Withdrawal and Avoidance

In response to repeated questioning and societal pressure, several participants reported adopting avoidance strategies. This included limiting social interactions or avoiding specific environments where discussions about marriage were likely to arise.

One participant stated:

"I avoid meeting people who keep asking about marriage." (Participant, 26 years)

Another participant described this as a protective strategy:

"It's easier to stay away from gatherings where you know the same questions will come up." (Participant, 34 years)

Over time, this avoidance sometimes became more structured. A participant explained:

"With time, you just stop attending certain events to avoid uncomfortable conversations." (Participant, 41 years)

However, this withdrawal was not complete isolation. Participants emphasized that they maintained relationships with supportive individuals while selectively distancing themselves from those who contributed to pressure. This suggests that avoidance functioned as a coping mechanism rather than a sign of disengagement.

Impact on Decision-Making and Life Trajectories

Societal expectations were found to influence participants' decision-making processes, particularly regarding education, career, and future planning. Several participants described altering or delaying significant life decisions due to marriage-related pressure.

One participant shared:

"I delayed my plans to go abroad because of marriage proposals." (Participant, 25 years)

Another participant described confusion caused by competing expectations:

"Because of pressure, I became confused and wasted a year deciding what to do." (Participant, 30 years)

A participant in her late 30s reflected on long-term effects:

"You start making decisions while keeping marriage in mind, even if it's not your priority." (Participant, 39 years)

These findings suggest that societal pressure extends beyond emotional impact and can shape life trajectories, influencing autonomy and personal development.

Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and employed various coping strategies. Social support, particularly from friends and immediate family, emerged as a critical factor in mitigating the impact of societal pressure.

One participant explained:

"My friends support me, and that makes it easier to deal with everything." (Participant, 28 years)

Another participant emphasized the importance of family understanding:

"If your family understands you, then the pressure doesn't affect you as much." (Participant, 36 years)

Participants also described personal strategies, including focusing on career development, independence, and self-growth. One participant stated:

"I want to be financially independent and make my own decisions before getting married." (Participant, 27 years)

A participant in her late 40s reflected on long-term coping:

"I focused on my career and independence instead of worrying about societal expectations." (Participant, 49 years)

These findings highlight the importance of both social and individual factors in buffering the psychological impact of societal expectations.

Discussion

This study examined how unmarried women in Pakistan manage societal expectations regarding marriage and the impact of these expectations on their daily lives. The results indicate that expectations surrounding marriage are common and are frequently communicated indirectly through everyday interactions such as questions being asked during family gatherings, comparisons with peers, and subtle prompts regarding "appropriate timing." Such normalization show the functioning of social expectations within everyday conversations, rather than through direct pressure. Similar qualitative research in South Asian and other collectivist contexts revealed how social expectations are ingrained in everyday

discussion and propagated through interpersonal networks, thereby influencing acceptable life pathways for women.(Ullah, 2025) The narratives of participants also emphasized diverse emotional reactions to these expectations. Some women reported little stress, usually because they had strong family support. Others, on the other hand, talked about feeling unsure of themselves, frustrated, ruminating, and not being able to sleep well. These narratives highlight the emotional labor entailed in the ongoing negotiation of expectations, even in the absence of clear endorsement by women. Qualitative research on gender norms and well-being has similarly demonstrated that facing normative expectations can be internalized, leading to continuous emotional distress, especially when individuals perceive themselves as being assessed against societal timelines.(Wetherell, 2012) The diversity in responses noted in this study indicates that expectations do not influence all women uniformly; instead, experiences are shaped by individual circumstances, coping mechanisms, and the presence of supportive relationships.

A key finding was the employment of social withdrawal as a coping mechanism. Some participants said they stayed away from gatherings or didn't talk to relatives who often asked them about marriage. Avoidance helped them avoid uncomfortable situations and keep their sense of independence. This corresponds with qualitative evidence regarding stigma management, wherein individuals employ selective disengagement that protect their self-concept and reduce emotional distress. (Scambler, 2019)But these kinds of strategies can also have unintended effects, like making it harder for people to participate in social activities and making them feel more alone in some situations.

The study further demonstrates how expectations regarding marriage can influence decision-making and life planning. Participants indicated that they had delayed or reconsidered educational and career opportunities because of ongoing discussions regarding marriage or perceived time limitations. This conflict between individual ambitions and societal norms is extensively recorded in gender studies, highlighting how women frequently manage conflicting pressures concerning autonomy, familial obligations, and social acceptance.(Crenshaw, 1991) Even when women don't want to, the importance to always explain their choices might change how they make decisions and what they put first.

Additionally, a protective factor was shown to be beneficial for relationships. Women reported feeling more confident in their choices and experiencing less negative psychological consequences when they talked about having understanding parents or supportive peer networks. On the other hand, people who didn't have this kind of support were more likely to feel anxious and upset. This result is in line with qualitative and mixed-methods research showing that social support can improve coping and resilience while mitigating the consequences of normative expectations. In this study, support seemed to modify how women perceived and responded to expectations rather than eliminating them.

When taken as a whole, these results highlight the fact that marriage expectations are continuous social processes ingrained in daily life rather than independent events. They have an effect are influenced by relationships, context, and personal agency. They are created and replicated via everyday interactions. This study illustrates the complex ways that women navigate expectations over time and deepens our understanding of gender norms in Pakistan by focusing on lived experiences.

Strength and limitations:

A key strength of this study is the use of in-depth qualitative interviews, which enabled a rich exploration of participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to marriage expectations. The inclusion of women across the 25–49 age range captured variability across life stages, while the use of verbatim transcripts and multi-reviewer analysis enhanced analytic rigor and credibility. At the same time, several limitations should be considered. Recruitment through online platforms may have favored women with internet access and higher educational backgrounds, potentially limiting representation of more marginalized groups. As with all self-reported data, responses may be influenced by social desirability, particularly given the sensitivity of the topic. Additionally, while qualitative findings provide depth and contextual insight, they are not intended for statistical generalization. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable, contextually grounded insights into how marriage expectations are experienced and negotiated by unmarried women in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This study shows that societal expectations around marriage are a common part of life for unmarried women aged 25–49 in Pakistan. These expectations, often coming from family and social circles, can affect how women feel about themselves and their life choices. Many participants described feelings of stress, self-doubt, and pressure, especially as they grow older.

At the same time, women use different ways to manage this pressure, such as focusing on their careers, setting personal priorities, and relying on supportive friends and family. Overall, the findings highlight the need to create more understanding and acceptance around different life choices, so women can make decisions without feeling pressured.

Abbreviations

IDIs: In-depth interviews

ERC: Ethical Review Committee

AKU: Aga Khan University

DMS: Data Management System

Declarations

Data availability:

The data generated and analyzed during this study consist of qualitative interview transcripts. Due to the sensitive nature of the data and to protect participant confidentiality, the datasets are not publicly

available. De-identified data may be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to approval by the relevant ethical review committee.

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We appreciate the time that each participant and school has given us. The first author can provide the analytic code upon reasonable request, but the data and resources required to replicate the studies given here are not publicly available. These analyses weren't preregistered**.**

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‘All authors are affiliated with the Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan. Armish Hassan (AH) conceptualized the study, led the data collection, contributed to the methodology development, conducted data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Narjis Rizvi (NR) provided overall supervision and contributed to the qualitative data analysis. Shafquat Rozi (SR) guided and contributed to the methodological development of the study. Wafa Zehra Jamal (WZJ) was primarily responsible for writing the results section. All authors critically reviewed, contributed to revisions, and approved the final version of the manuscript

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Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

No competing interests of any author

Ethics declarations

Ethical approval and consent of participant

The study was conducted under the supervision of Aga Khan University, which holds responsibility for data governance and protection. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan (ERC No: 2024-9882-30733). Participants were informed about data confidentiality, storage, and their rights prior to participation, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Any requests regarding the study data can be directed to the Principal Investigator.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used OpenAI's ChatGPT for [specific purposes, e.g., generating initial drafts, refining the structure of the manuscript, or enhancing language clarity]. After using this tool, the author(s) thoroughly reviewed and edited the content to ensure its accuracy, integrity, and alignment with the objectives of the study. The author(s) take full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

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