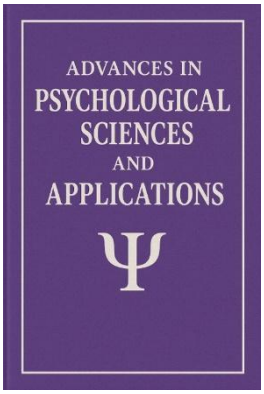
ADVANCES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES AND APPLICATIONS

IISTR



The Invisible Burden: A Qualitative Study on the Emotional Well-being of Women Over 30 in Peshawar, Pakistan

[1]Samina Naz*, [2]Nihal Tabassum

Affiliations:

[1] Chevening Scholar, Westminster University of London. United Kingdom

[1] Khyber Law College, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

*Correspondence: Saminamurcakhail@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The emotional well-being of women in traditional, patriarchal societies is often shaped by sociocultural pressures that differ significantly from Western contexts. This study explores the unique challenges faced by women over 30 in Peshawar, Pakistan, a city with strong Pashtun cultural norms. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 unmarried and married women aged 30-38. The findings reveal that the trajectory of psychological distress often begins at birth with a son-preference ideology, leading to restricted educational and career opportunities, limited personal autonomy, and sanctioned social control. A particularly significant finding is the prevalence of emotionally exploitative relationships, where male figures, often presented as friends or potential partners, leverage societal constraints to dominate and emotionally blackmail women, severely impacting their mental health. This control is framed within a discourse of religious and cultural propriety, creating intense internal conflict. The discussion highlights that these pressures systematically violate fundamental rights that are globally recognized, leading to chronic anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth. The study concludes that the emotional well-being of these women is not merely a mental health issue but a direct consequence of structural inequality. It implies the need for culturally sensitive mental health interventions and robust policy frameworks that challenge the normative gender biases entrenched in the societal fabric.

Keywords

Emotional Blackmail
Emotional Well-being
Gender Pressure
Mental Health
Sociocultural Norms

Article history

Received 30 October 2025
Revised 9 November 2025
Accepted 20 November 2025

journal.iistr.org/index.php/APSA
DOI: 10.56741/apsa.v1i03.1523

APSA

Advances in Psychological Sciences and Applications

Vol. 1, No. 03, pp. 136-142

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee IISTR, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Common Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC–BY-SA) license.

Introduction

In patriarchal societies like Pakistan, a woman's life often unfolds as a narrative of controlled autonomy, where her choices are shaped and constrained by multiple layers of social and familial expectations [1]. For women over the age of thirty in deeply conservative cities such as Peshawar, these controls become even more restrictive, forming a dense network of pressures linked to marital status, reproductive expectations, career limitations, and social conformity [2]. Although existing studies have discussed the structural and cultural restrictions that limit women's freedom [3], [4], there remains a significant gap in understanding the cumulative emotional impact of a lifetime of conditional acceptance and neglect. Particularly underexplored is the psychological effect of betrayal by intimate partners who were initially perceived as potential sources of love, security, and liberation but ultimately become instruments of renewed subjugation.

This study argues that women in this demographic often experience what can be described as a succession of dictators, a pattern of dominant male figures from father to husband who collectively shape the boundaries of a woman's autonomy and emotional well-being. From early childhood, affection and validation are often withheld or made dependent on obedience, creating an internalized need for male approval [5]. As a result, many women develop a marital fantasy, a belief that marriage will provide the understanding, companionship, and emotional safety that were absent earlier in life [6]. When this fantasy collapses and the husband becomes the final authority figure enforcing patriarchal control, the emotional consequences are severe. The woman's sense of self, once built upon the hope of mutual respect, is reduced to a role defined by domestic service rather than personal identity. This study seeks to examine the psychological and cultural mechanisms that sustain this cycle of emotional disenfranchisement and to reveal how love, power, and control intersect in the lived experiences of women within patriarchal marriage systems.

Methods

A. Research Design and Participant Selection

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants [7]. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 15 women aged between 30 and 38 years from Peshawar. The cohort included both married (n=9) and unmarried (n=6) women from diverse educational and professional backgrounds to capture a wide spectrum of experiences.

B. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and was conducted in a private, secure setting in the participant's

preferred language (Urdu or Pashto). The interview protocol was designed to explore key themes, including: experiences of gender-based discrimination in the family, barriers to education and career, perceptions of personal freedom, experiences in interpersonal relationships with men, and the impact of these factors on their emotional state. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing from all participants, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality [8].

C. Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the systematic process [3].

Results

Table 1 presents four major themes that reflect the continuity of emotional deprivation experienced by participants across different stages of their lives. The first theme illustrates how many women grew up in environments where their emotions were dismissed or treated as inconvenient, creating a long-term sense of inadequacy and what several participants described as emotional deprivation. This early vulnerability becomes the foundation for later relational patterns. The second theme highlights *transactional intimacy*, reported by 92% of participants, who described relationships with male friends or partners that began with attentive emotional engagement but gradually shifted toward sexual or self-serving intentions. These interactions often ended abruptly, revealing manipulation that deepened existing emotional wounds. The third theme focuses on marriage, where participants expected stability and emotional fulfillment but instead encountered neglect, utilitarian roles, and emotional distance, reinforcing their fears of unworthiness and contributing to chronic stress. Finally, the fourth theme identifies a universal pattern in which similar disappointment occurred across all relationships with men, shaped by cultural norms of hostile masculinity. These norms encourage men to view women instrumentally rather than as equal emotional partners. Together, these findings show how lifelong emotional deprivation, repeated exploitation, and unmet needs contribute to significant psychological strain and erosion of self-trust.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that emotional neglect among women in patriarchal contexts is not incidental or isolated but is systematically embedded within the very fabric of social and familial structures. From early childhood, emotional invalidation is normalized through gendered expectations that dictate emotional restraint and self-suppression for women, while encouraging dominance and expressiveness in men. This imbalance constructs a lifelong cycle of deprivation and exploitation, where women's emotional needs are either dismissed or used against them [9]. The women who participated in this research repeatedly

emphasized that they were raised in households where affection was conditional, empathy was scarce, and silence was equated with virtue [1]. As a result, they entered adulthood with an unfulfilled longing for genuine emotional recognition, making them highly susceptible to manipulation in relationships.

Table 1. Patterns of Emotional Experiences

Theme	Key Description	Representative Quote	Psychological Impact
The Architecture of Emotional Deprivation	Women grew up in environments where their emotions were dismissed, invalidated, or framed as burdensome. This deprivation formed early emotional "starvation."	"From childhood, we learn that our feelings are inconvenient. Boys are allowed anger, desire, ambition – girls are taught to swallow everything." (35-year-old teacher)	Long-term vulnerability to exploitative relationships; internalized unworthiness; fragile emotional boundaries.
Transactional Intimacy: The Cycle of Emotional Exploitation	Relationships followed a pattern of instrumental care—men offering emotional intimacy only to pursue sexual or self-serving ends, then withdrawing.	"He listened so intently at first… Then gradually the conversations always turned sexual… the 'caring friend' disappeared." (33-year-old journalist)	Emotional manipulation; heightened stress; confusion; reinforcement of emotional deprivation; sense of being used for entertainment or validation.
		"Men don't see a friend or a pure heart in a woman – they see an opportunity." (31-year-old designer)	
		"He made me his priority until he was done with the attention." (32-year-old participant)	
The Shattered Marital Fantasy	Marriage, expected to provide emotional security, instead intensified feelings of neglect. Husbands treated women as functional rather than emotional partners.	Women described husbands as "far far away" from their expectations, treating them as "only for house chores and nothing more."	Hopelessness; chronic anxiety; collapse of trust in intimate relationships; confirmation of fears of unworthiness.
The Universal Pattern of Disappointment	Across various male relationships, participants experienced repeated cycles of objectification, withdrawal, and emotional abandonment rooted in cultural norms of hostile masculinity.	"It's the same story with different characters. Every man ultimately uses you for his purpose then leaves you emotionally stranded." (32-year-old writer)	Severe mental stress; erosion of self-trust; internalized belief of being unworthy of genuine care; emotional exhaustion.
		"A heart starved of legitimate affection will eventually accept poisoned bread."	

This vulnerability is particularly evident in their interactions with male friends or partners. Participants described consistent experiences of what they called "performative care," where men initially presented themselves as attentive listeners and empathetic companions, only

to later pursue sexual or self-serving goals [10]. This pattern aligns with cross-cultural research on hostile masculinity, where men are socialized to view women as instruments for conquest and validation rather than as partners in emotional intimacy [11]. The exploitation that emerges from this dynamic strategically capitalizes on the "emotional starvation" that women have endured since childhood. As one participant poignantly expressed, "A heart starved of legitimate affection will eventually accept poisoned bread." This statement encapsulates the psychological reality of women who, desperate for connection, internalize toxic forms of affection as acceptable substitutes for love [12].

The most profound contribution of this study lies in its exploration of the "shattered marital fantasy." Within the patriarchal psyche, the husband occupies a symbolic position as the ultimate provider of emotional safety and social legitimacy. For women raised in emotionally barren environments, marriage is often imagined as the long-awaited sanctuary of understanding and care. However, when the husband assumes the role of yet another "master," viewing his wife merely as a domestic worker or subordinate, the emotional devastation is complete. This betrayal extends beyond relational disappointment—it dismantles the very foundation of a woman's self-concept and her belief in the possibility of mutual respect. The collapse of this fantasy generates complex psychological trauma characterized by chronic anxiety, low self-worth, and emotional exhaustion [13].

Finally, the study redefines emotional well-being from the participants' perspective as a state of being "stress-free" and "understood." This redefinition challenges the conventional psychological focus on individual happiness as an internal construct. Instead, it suggests that mental health interventions in patriarchal societies must address the external, structural roots of emotional distress. True emotional well-being, as articulated by these women, requires more than therapy or resilience training. It demands the cultivation of environments where empathy, mutual respect, and emotional validation are normalized [9]. By exposing the deep cultural mechanisms that perpetuate emotional neglect, this study calls for a reimagining of both gender relations and the social understanding of mental health [14].

Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that the emotional well-being of women over 30 in Peshawar is a casualty of systemic patriarchal norms. They are not merely facing occasional stress; they are fighting a silent, continuous war against a lifetime of discrimination and emotional neglect. This war is waged in the intimate spaces of the home and the mind, leaving them in a state of perpetual suffering. Yet, their struggle remains largely invisible, their pain unacknowledged. Like salt in flour, her presence is essential, her work foundational, yet her suffering is dissolved into the whole, unseen and unappreciated by the very society that depends on her. She is deprived of the love and care she deserves by birth, then punished for seeking it. The research verdict is clear:

their psychological distress is a predictable response to a pathogenic environment, not individual pathology.

The implications are twofold. First, there is a critical need to foster internal resilience in young girls, teaching them that their self-worth is inherent and not contingent on male validation. As the saying goes, "A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch but on its own wings." We must teach our daughters to rely on their own wings. However, individual strength is insufficient against systemic failure. Therefore, the second, more crucial imperative is cultural and educational reform aimed at boys and men. Society must move beyond romanticizing female sacrifice and instead hold men accountable for being emotionally present, understanding partners. The solution lies not only in creating strong women who do not need exploitative care, but in cultivating a society where such exploitation is obsolete because men are taught to provide genuine, consistent emotional support, finally seeing the woman who has been silently holding the world together.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References

[1] S. Altay, 'Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis', *E-Şarkiyat İlmi Araştırmaları DergisiJournal Orient. Sci. Res. JOSR*, Apr. 2019, doi: 10.26791/sarkiat.541704.

[2] G. M. Ricketts, 'Men Strike Out', *Acad. Quest.*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 505–509, Oct. 2013, doi: 10.1007/s12129-013-9387-y.

[3] V. Braun and V. Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qual. Res. Psychol.*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 77–101, Jan. 2006, doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

[4] A. Gregory, G. Feder, A. Taket, and E. Williamson, 'Qualitative study to explore the health and well-being impacts on adults providing informal support to female domestic violence survivors', *BMJ Open*, vol. 7, no. 3, p. e014511, 2017.

[5] N. Elsy, 'Self-Care and Emotional Well-Being of a Women Educators: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', in *Narratives on Defining Moments for Women Leaders in Higher Education*, IGI Global, 2025, pp. 47–64.

[6] S. C. Duplantier and F. A. Williamson, 'Barriers and facilitators of health and well-being in informal caregivers of dementia patients: a qualitative study', *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public. Health*, vol. 20, no. 5, p. 4328, 2023.

[7] C. Tarnoki and K. Puentes, 'Something for Everyone: A Review of Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches', *Qual. Rep.*, Dec. 2019, doi: 10.46743/2160-3715/2019.4294.

[8] S. de Ruig, F. van Rooij, M. van Hattum, J. Bres, and C. Kuiper, 'Burden: A qualitative analysis', *Child. Youth Serv. Rev.*, vol. 175, p. 108353, 2025.

[9] S. K. Murnen, 'A social constructivist approach to understanding the relationship between masculinity and sexual aggression.', *Psychol. Men Masculinity*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 370–373, Oct. 2015, doi: 10.1037/a0039693.

[10] S. R. Nyman, B. Dibb, C. R. Victor, and M. A. Gosney, 'Emotional well-being and adjustment to vision loss in later life: a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies', *Disabil. Rehabil.*, vol. 34, no. 12, pp. 971–981, 2012.

[11] J. Newbury, 'Individualizing Trauma: Pathologizing Populations and Perpetuating Violence? A Book Review', *Psychol. Stud.*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 325–327, Apr. 2011, doi: 10.1007/s12646-011-0080-3.

[12] S. Martin, 'The Rose That Lost All Its Petals: Exploring the Negative Mental Health Impacts of Evangelical Purity Culture on Women Who Experienced It', 2024.

[13] Suh, 'Women in Asian/Asian North American Religion: Whose Asian/Asian North America? Whose Religion?', *J. Fem. Stud. Relig.*, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 137, 2015, doi: 10.2979/jfemistudreli.31.1.137.

[14] J. Alam and S. Gul, 'The Influence Of Socio-Economic System On Academic Achievement Of Women Folk In Pakhtun Society', *Pak. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 1–14, Mar. 2017, doi: 10.46568/pjass.v5i1.302.

Authors



Samina Naz is a working journalist from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), known for her significant achievements in journalism and professional development. She is a recipient of the prestigious Chevening Award from the UK government. Further demonstrating her dedication to excellence, she is also an award winner from a United States institution, specifically Oklahoma University (US). Her career combines hands-on journalism with high-level academic recognition, reflecting a commitment to professional excellence. (email: Saminamurcakhail@gmail.com).



Nihal Tabassum is working as a Legal Assistant at the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Food Safety and Halal Food Authority, Pakistan, and holds an LLM degree in Human Rights. Nihal has over a decade of legal experience advocating for human rights, gender violence, discrimination, and the mental health impact of intimate partner behavior, working directly with women and transgender individuals to drive legal reform and social justice. (email: Nihaltabassum11@gmail.com).