

# Is Education Empowering? Examining the Complex Relation of Education and Dowry Practices in Pakistan

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**Abstract:** This study explores the paradoxical relationship between education and dowry practices in Pakistan, focusing on whether education serves as a catalyst for social change or reinforces orthodoxy. While education is often associated with empowerment, existing evidence from India and Bangladesh suggests that it can exacerbate dowry practices. In such cases, education functions as a signal of a groom's quality in the marriage market. In neoliberal and capitalist societies, enhanced human capital among men increases their competitiveness, often leading to higher dowry demands.

This study aims to explore whether women in white-collar professions continue to provide dowry despite having earnings comparable to men. It examines whether dowry is discouraged when women have same labour market return or are there other factors like normative structure of the society that influence these practices. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with financially independent women in prestigious careers. The research will analyse their experiences in the marriage market through the lens of empowerment, assessing the extent to which education leading to economic independence affects dowry expectations and negotiations.

**Keywords:** Dowry, Freirean Pedagogy, Gender Equity, Orthodox Discourses, Patriarchy, Women Empowerment. Resources, Agency, and Achievements.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of women's empowerment, promoting female participation across all aspects of life, reducing gender disparities, and strengthening women's roles within the family (Bhat, 2015). By fostering moral awareness, education creates conditions for a better society (ibid). Based on this perspective, universal access to education is often seen as a solution to various social issues. However, the reality is far more complex and social inequalities continue to persist. Despite rising enrolment rates and education subsidies, dowry remains prevalent and continues to increase (Anderson, 2007; Munshi, 2012; Rahman Chowdhury, n.d.; Yasmeen et al., 2021). "Dowry is usually described as the transfer of wealth from brides' parents to groom and his parents at the time of marriage" (Makino, 2014, p. 2). Failure to bring the desired dowry may have repercussions for married women including domestic violence and even bride burning. Pakistan reports the highest number of dowry-related deaths globally (Anderson, 2000; Imtiaz & Afza, 2009), even though laws exist to restrict the practice. The Dowry and Bridal Gifts (Restriction) Act explicitly states: "Neither the aggregate value of the dowry and presents given to the bride by her parents nor the aggregate value of the bridal gifts or presents given to the bridegroom shall exceed five thousand rupees" (Jafri et al., 1976, p. 2). However, enforcement remains weak, allowing the tradition to persist.

Anderson (2000, 2003) conducted pioneering research that identified a distinct pattern: while dowry payments decreased in the Global North as both men and women gained education, the opposite trend was observed in Pakistan, where dowry practices persisted or even intensified despite increased education levels.

This prompts an essential question: if both men and women have comparable education levels and actively contribute to the workforce, why does the responsibility of dowry still largely rest on the bride's family? According to Anderson's model (2000), when the bride and groom share similar educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, marriage transactions should balance out, removing the necessity for financial transfers in the form of dowry. However, existing literature presents

somewhat paradoxical findings (Dasgupta & Mukherjee, 2003; Munshi, 2012; Rahman Chowdhury, n.d.) Research from India, where socio-demographic patterns closely mirror those of Pakistan, indicates that women with higher education levels often pay a higher net dowry. A positive correlation emerges between a bride's education and dowry, despite the expectation that education enhances women's empowerment (Rahman Chowdhury, n.d.).

This phenomenon aligns with Becker's econometrics of marriage model, which argues that economic expansion, driven by neoliberalism, has reinforced rather than diminished dowry practices (Becker, 1991). Traditionally, education has been associated with economic success, but with a stronger emphasis on men than women. Becker's analysis suggests that societies with significant wealth disparities are more susceptible to dowry transactions (ibid). In such contexts, education serves as a proxy for groom quality, reinforcing endogamous marriage patterns, while women do not experience the same economic benefits from their education.

## 2. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research is to explore the connection between education and dowry practices through empowerment lens. Through an analysis of interviews with financially independent women in professional roles, the study examines whether education genuinely empowers women or if it merely reinforces existing inequalities.

Findings from the literature review will offer valuable insights for policy development, advocacy efforts, and educational reforms aimed at fostering inclusivity, enhancing empowerment, and addressing gender-sensitive issues within the education system.

The present inquiry intends to solve the following research questions:

1. How educational achievements impact dowry demands for highly educated and financially independent women?
2. How women's empowerment is affected by education-dowry relationship?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative and interpretive methodology, using Zoom interviews, to investigate the relationship between education and empowerment against dowry culture. It sought to address a research gap by investigating the role of education in enhancing women's empowerment, specifically their ability to make dowry decisions on their own in the marriage market. Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature and analysed through the Empowerment Framework. The findings provided insights into women's experiences of empowerment post-financial independence, highlighting how education influences their position in the marriage market. The semi-structured interviews facilitated an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences (Kvale, 1983).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with educational qualifications, financial independence, and marital experience, ensuring that their perspectives on dowry could be meaningfully explored. All prospective participants received an information sheet and consent form via email, and interviews were scheduled based on informed consent. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and anonymity, were upheld by using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities (Crow et al., 2006).

**TABLE. I: Characteristics of Interviewees**

Respondent	Age at marriage	Spouses age at the time of marriage	Female education level	Male education level	Parental level of education Father/mother	Living with in-laws	Dowry/bequest
Mona	25	29	Engineer	Engineer	Engineer/ graduate	no	basics/needs
Sara	28	32	Bachelors	Chartered Accountant	Masters/ Graduate	yes	Dowry in the form of furniture/ Appliances+ gifts to in-laws
Meena	22	34	Bachelors	Masters	Doctor/Graduate	yes	Basics for own use + gifts to in-laws
Asma	24	25	Engineer	Engineer	Both graduates	yes	Household/white appliances
Misha	23	28	Masters	Masters	Doctor/Masters	no	Basics for own use + gifts to in-laws
Hina	24	27	Doctor	Engineer	Both Graduate	yes	Bedroom furniture+ gifts to in-laws
Iqra	23	30	bachelors	MBA	Both Masters	yes	Kitchenware +Gifts to in-laws
Wania	24	28	Graduation	Graduation	Masters/graduate	no	Furniture for the new house (cost shared equally)

#### 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research begins by examining dowry as a legacy of colonial rule. It then explores the negative perceptions of educated women in patriarchal societies, where they are often viewed as opinionated and strong-willed, making it difficult for them to conform to traditional marital expectations. Lastly, the study investigates how education can be both limiting and perpetuate inequality by reinforcing orthodox discourses. It highlights scholarly arguments advocating for gender equity over the gender parity approach and emphasizes the importance of empowering education through a critical socialist perspective.

##### *Aftermath of colonial rule:*

While the exact timeline of dowry's evolution remains unclear, some scholars suggest that the practice became more institutionalized and widespread during British rule in India (Sheel, 1997; Soni, 2020). The historical trajectory of dowry in the Indian subcontinent reveals a shift from its pre-colonial roots to an economic practice driven by financial demands. In the pre-colonial era, dowry functioned as a woman-centric institution, intended to provide financial security, and elevate a woman's social standing (Nithya NR, 2013). Women in pre-colonial Punjab actively participated in local economies and shared land ownership (Oldenburg & Rao, n.d.). However, British colonial policies significantly altered this status by legally restricting women from owning property, which ultimately led to the transformation of dowry into an exploitative practice (ibid).

British codified laws, particularly those concerning land tenure, systematically marginalized women, making them economically dependent on men. This legal shift reinforced a male-dominated economic structure in which a woman's inherited wealth was transferred to her husband. As a result, the traditional dowry system evolved into an instrument of economic exploitation, fostering greed, victimization, and oppression (Nithya NR, 2013).

Over time, men's increasing economic significance heightened their perceived social value, turning dowry into a financial transaction where the groom's family made explicit demands from the bride's family. By the 1850s, dowry had transitioned from a symbolic gesture of familial affection into a compulsory and often burdensome expectation (ibid). The commodification of the colonial economy further extended to women, intensifying dowry demands. Traditional practices of reciprocity, where communities collectively contributed to a bride's well-being, were replaced by contractual obligations that led to widespread debt and the erosion of women's legal rights.

##### *Negative perception of educated women:*

In Pakistani society, it is commonly believed that a bride with higher education and paid employment outside the home possesses greater bargaining power in marriage compared to a less-educated bride (Munshi, 2012). This bargaining power refers to an educated woman's ability to negotiate and influence marital decisions. Consequently, in the event of marital conflict, she is more likely to exercise agency and leave the marriage if necessary. In other words, marrying an educated woman is perceived as a higher risk for the groom, as she may be more likely to seek a divorce. Given that groom's value marital stability and longevity, they may demand a higher dowry as compensation for the perceived risk associated with marrying an educated bride (ibid).

Additionally, educated women tend to be more independent-minded, often holding opinions that may conflict with the groom's parents' interests. Since parental dependence on sons for old-age support is a deeply ingrained norm, a daughter-in-law who may not conform to traditional expectations can be seen as a threat to family stability. As a result, even though an educated bride is considered of higher "quality," she may not necessarily be preferred by the groom's parents. In such cases, dowry payments do not decrease as expected (Rahman Chowdhury, n.d.).

Moreover, in Pakistan's marriage market, younger brides are generally favoured (Shahzad, 2017). Higher education typically leads to delayed marriage, which can further contribute to increased dowry expectations. As a result, both age and education levels are positively correlated with higher dowry demands (Rahman Chowdhury, n.d.).

##### *Gender parity vs gender equity approach in education:*

In the Global South, women's education has become a key priority for international development efforts (Monkman, 2011; Stromquist & Fischman, 2009). Education is widely regarded as essential for gender empowerment and for driving economic, social, and political progress in developing countries (Herz & Sperling, 2004; Schultz, 1960; Tembon & Fort,

2008). Gender parity is often framed as an issue of access to institutions and resources, such as schools and labour markets (Guinée, 2014; Jeffrey et al., 2008). This perspective assumes that increasing women's education will naturally lead to greater workforce participation and, in turn, enhanced gender equality (Gee, 2015; Unterhalter, 2010).

However, despite improved access to education and employment for women in many developing nations, the gender parity model has not yielded the anticipated social and economic advancements for women (Chisamya et al., 2012; Subrahmanian, 2005; Unterhalter, 2007). While the gender parity approach has successfully expanded resources available to women, feminist scholars argue that it fails to consider the complex and context-dependent nature of education, which can simultaneously empower and constrain women (Arur & DeJaeghere, 2019; Chisamya et al., 2012; Guney et al., n.d.; Stromquist, 2002; Unterhalter, 2012).

Critics highlight the limitations of the gender parity framework, emphasizing that it focuses primarily on access while overlooking the deeper structural inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities (Aikman et al., 2005; Subrahmanian, 2005; Unterhalter, 2007). Rather than assuming that gender parity will automatically result in gender equality, scholars advocate for a shift toward gender equity. This approach examines the ways in which structural inequalities shape gendered social dynamics and evaluates the actual impact of education and labour market access on gender equality (Unterhalter et al., 2013).

While increased access to education and economic opportunities may reduce certain aspects of gender inequality, it can also reinforce existing gender hierarchies, such as heightened societal control over women's behaviour, particularly concerning their sexuality. The gender equity framework recognizes that gender equality is a complex, multifaceted process that cannot be achieved solely through greater access to education or employment. Instead, it calls for a critical examination of the structural shifts that occur when women assume new roles and responsibilities. To foster true gender equality, scholars and policymakers must advocate for gender-responsive policies, dismantle discriminatory practices, promote gender-conscious education, and encourage inclusive leadership (Khurshid, 2016).

#### ***Critical Social Theory as a Framework for Empowering Education:***

Feminist scholars advocate for "real" education that challenges dominant ideologies and disrupts the status quo (Nussbaum, 2003; Stromquist, 1995). However, such transformative education is often difficult to implement, as it threatens existing power structures (Nussbaum, 2003; Unterhalter, 2007; Unterhalter & Walker, 2007). This aligns with critical pedagogy, which connects education to broader political and economic analysis, positioning schools as spaces for social critique and student empowerment (Murphy, 2012). Critical pedagogy is a praxis, requiring both reflection and action (Freire, 1973).

Drawing from critical social theory (CST), critical pedagogy emphasizes the liberating potential of knowledge (Leonardo, 2004). CST encourages students to question, deconstruct, and reconstruct knowledge to challenge power structures related to race, class, and gender (ibid). Instead of a "banking" model of rote learning, critical pedagogy promotes problem-posing education, which builds on students' prior knowledge and experiences to foster critical consciousness. Dialogue between teachers and students serves as the key instrument for learning, enabling both groups to critically engage with their realities (ibid).

As praxis, critical pedagogy demands both theory and action to drive social transformation. Monchinski (2008) asserts that critical pedagogy affirms suspicions that the world is unjust and offers hope for change if individuals act. Critical social theorists argue that education should equip students to critically engage with the world and envision a more just society (Leonardo, 2004). While linking education directly to empowerment may be overly optimistic, scholars in education and international development recognize critical pedagogy as a powerful tool for social change (Unterhalter & Walker, 2007). Such critical education initiatives are often described as "pockets of hope" (de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002, p. 1).

### **5. EMPOWERMENT AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research applies Kabeer's empowerment framework consisting of resources, agency, and achievements to examine the intersection of education and dowry practices. Kabeer's extensive work on women's empowerment in the Global South provides a strong foundation for critically analysing the context.

Kabeer (1999) links power with the ability to make choices, with disempowerment occurring when this ability is denied. She defines empowerment as the process of expanding individuals' capacity to make strategic choices in situations where they were previously unable to do so (1999, p. 19). Here when we speak of "ability to make choices" education can play a

crucial role (Stromquist, 2015). In this regard, empowerment is inherently tied to disempowerment, as it involves the mechanisms through which individuals who have been excluded from decision-making gain agency. In other words, empowerment requires a transformative shift. Those who already have significant power and ability to make choice can necessarily not be empowered, as they were never subjected to disempowerment in the first place (Kabeer, 1999).

For choice to be meaningful, it must include real alternatives (ibid). However, in the context of marriage, even educated brides are not genuinely given the option to reject dowry. This is because patriarchal values and social norms dictate that dowry, whether as a groom price or a bequest, is an obligatory practice rather than a voluntary one. The mere existence of alternatives is not sufficient; they must also be perceived as viable options. As Kabeer (2005, p. 154) notes, "Power relations are most effective when they are not perceived as such. Gender often operates through the unquestioned acceptance of power." As a result, brides, and their families, who lack social power, comply with dowry demands imposed by their in-laws, not out of free will but due to the overwhelming societal constraints that make any other course of action nearly impossible. While these actions may seem like personal choices, they are manifestations of a deeper systemic denial of choice.

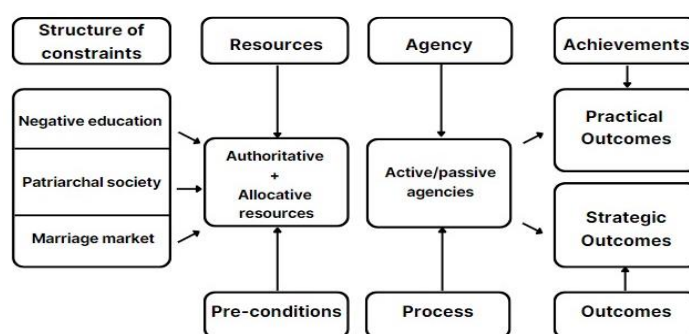
Not all decisions hold the same level of importance when it comes to gaining power. Some choices have a greater impact on people's lives than others. Kabeer (1999) categorizes these into first-order (strategic) choices and second-order choices. Strategic choices are major life decisions that shape a person's future, such as choosing an education, deciding what to study, selecting a marriage partner, and determining the number and timing of children. In Pakistani society, these critical decisions are often influenced by cultural and social norms rather than personal preference.

These strategic choices, in turn, affect second-order choices, which may impact one's quality of life but do not fundamentally reshape it. For example, what clothes to wear or what food to eat are decisions that matter but do not define a person's overall life trajectory. Since societal expectations strongly influence strategic choices, individuals especially women may find their ability to make truly independent decisions limited.

Kabeer (2005) stresses that the ability to make important life decisions (strategic choices) should not come at the expense of others' ability. However, in the case of marriage, the groom's family often exercises their power to make strategic choices such as demanding dowry while the bride's family is left with little to no say in the matter. This creates an imbalance where one side's empowerment comes at the cost of the other's disempowerment.

This situation underscores the need to critically examine the broader social norms and power structures that shape marriage practices. By understanding these dynamics, policy makers can better address how traditions like dowry can reinforce inequalities.

**Fig.1: Empowerment Framework**



Source: *Theory of Change* (Kabeer, 1999)

Kabeer (1999) empowerment framework consists of theory of change consisting of resources (pre-conditions), agency(process) and achievements (outcomes) as follows:

#### **Resources:**

Resources serve as how one exercises agency (Kabeer, 2005). In the broader economic context, resources encompass not only tangible assets but also diverse human and social capital that contribute to the enhancement of agency in decision-



making (Kabeer, 1999). These resources are embedded in the values of the society, be it family, market, or community. These values give more importance to certain group of people who hold 'authoritative resources' (Giddens, 1979). Elites within a community, heads of households, and chiefs of tribes are all endowed with decision-making authority within specific institutional contexts by virtue of their status. "Allocative resources" are the property of the remainder, contingent on the decisions of those in possession of authoritative resources.

Consider the family a resource within the context of Pakistan. This resource has a substantial impact on gender roles. The allocation of roles for girls and boys is determined by societal norms, with the family Sosa (2017). In case of marriage which is endogamous and hypergamous (Saleem et al., 2015), expects bride's side to conform to certain rituals, dowry is one of them. This normative structure of family dynamics at home transcends into schools.

To think of education as a resource, as discussed above, can reproduce dominant discourses and patriarchal values (Stromquist, 2002). As Unterhalter (2019, p. 7) aptly puts, "Education is an outcome of authority". Education often occurs when an individual in a position of influence or authority determines the content and methodology of instruction. Individuals in positions of authority, such as educators, school administrators, or government officials, hold the power to establish the curriculum, regulations, and framework of education, so shaping the specific information and abilities that students gain. This idea asserts that education is molded by individuals in positions of power, hence mirroring their values, convictions, and objectives. As a result, when men and women are legally bound in the institution of marriage, they are confined within the parameters set by the societal and institutional structures.

#### **Agency:**

The second dimension of power relates to agency, the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation, and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, or 'the power within'. While agency tends to be operationalized as 'decision-making' it can also take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion, and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individually or collectively (Kabeer, 1999).

Agency has both positive and negative meanings in relation to power. In the positive sense of the 'power to', it refers to people's capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others. Agency can also be exercised in the more negative sense of 'power over', in other words, the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others, for instance, using violence, coercion and threat (Kabeer, 2005). However, power can also operate in the absence of any explicit agency. The norms and rules governing social behaviour tend to ensure that certain outcomes are reproduced without any apparent exercise of agency (Kabeer, 1999). So, the groom's parents in marriage can practice their "power over" the bride's side without absence of explicit power and have their agency over. These relations are accepted as the normative structure of the society and automatically translate into routine. Due to this acceptance of these cultural norms, women at times do not even "choose not to choose," as Kabeer (1999, p. 440) puts. "The equation between power and choice finds it far more difficult to accommodate forms of gender inequality when these appear to have been chosen by women themselves." This is related to Bourdieu's (1977) idea of 'doxa'. Doxa refers to "the aspects of tradition and culture which are so taken-for-granted that they have become naturalized" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 441). The concept of doxa proves to be advantageous in this context as it redirects our focus from the binary opposition between false and authentic consciousness to the issue of different forms of reality and the strategic and practical implications they generate.

Agency in the context of empowerment involves more than simply making choices; it encompasses actively making choices in a manner that challenges existing power dynamics. If a bride's family resists the prevailing norms, such as opposing dowry practices, they are exercising their agency. The process of empowerment is rooted in individuals' self-perception, their sense of self-worth, which is intricately linked to how they are perceived by those in their immediate surroundings and within society at large (Kabeer, 2005).

Sathar and Kazi (1997) state that based on data from Pakistan, the only area of decision-making in which women reported not only participate but play a major decision-making role was in relation to the purchase of food. It is evident that women played a role in making decisions which were of little consequence or which were assigned to women anyway by the pre-existing gender division of roles and responsibilities, tell us far less about their power to choose than evidence on decisions which relate to strategic life choices or to choices which had been denied to them in the past (Kabeer, 1999).

**Achievements:**

Capabilities which are comprised of resources and agency, represent the potential of individuals to lead the lives they desire (Sen, 1985). The expression 'achievements' is the degree to which this potential is actualized or fails. It refers to the outcome of individuals' endeavors. Achievements in the context of empowerment have been evaluated according to both the degree of agency exerted and the consequences that follow (Kabeer, 2005).

For instance, being involved in paid work could be regarded evidence of progress in women's empowerment. However, it would be far more likely to constitute such evidence if work was taken up in response to a new opportunity or in search of greater self-reliance, rather than what Kabeer (2005) calls 'distress sale' of labour. It is also far more likely to be empowering if it contributes to women's sense of independence, rather than simply meeting survival needs for instance in case of inflation.

Similarly, in case of education, it could be achieved to gain self-awareness, consciousness rather than merely equipping women to become better wives or mothers or even attracting a competent groom at the first place.

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The codes that surfaced during the interviews were categorized into the following themes:

**Role of education in marriage market:**

Pakistani society exhibits a virilocal characteristic. To ensure that their daughters are securely established for life, parents of brides are especially cognizant of the character and financial prospects of their sons-in-law. Respondents and their families were in complete agreement when inquired about the qualities that they desired in a prospective husband. It was unanimously agreed that education ought to take precedence.

Asma said, *"my parents were looking for a compatible life partner, one who has a nice family background and is well educated. My father was particularly looking for a doctor or an engineer as they are ever green fields. You cannot go jobless with them!"*

Meena was also of the same opinion, *"first and foremost is education! With education comes manners and values."*

Similarly, Hina opined *"Since my own family was well educated, they wanted equally compatible family background. I have seen instances where educated women get married into less educated families and then face issues. Men are mostly jealous if their wives are better qualified or have better paid jobs."*

Wania was rather shocked, as if there could only be one answer to that question, *"Education! what else it could be. Afterall, I had to live with him for my entire life! How can one even think of living with an illiterate person?"*

Iqra added while answering the same question, *"My parents were looking for someone educated and settled." He should be a compatible and open-minded individual who sees a wife working."* She further added that, *"This was true for my in-laws as well. They wanted an educated daughter in law who is working as in this age of inflation. It is better for both husband and wife to earn and live a decent life."*

While reminiscing challenges encountered during studies, Mona shared her experience, *"I chose a male dominated field and it was not easy. I could not give up working for nothing."* Her views about the importance of groom's education were very clear, *"Although I was working before marriage but in our culture, one is at the discretion of the in-laws. Of course, an educated family would be broad minded enough to understand that girls should be given freedom to work. That is why my family and I were looking for a groom from an educated background."*

Misha too was of the same opinion, *"Since rest of the qualities are intangible, the only guarantee that a person has is, his education!"* She further added, *"Prior to marriage, grooms' parents introduced their sons from their degrees. You cannot bring your Mercedes car into a drawing room but you can always boost of your Oxford university degree to impress the bride's side of the family."*

**Discussion: Proxy measure of groom quality**

It can be critically analyzed through Kabeer's (1999) empowerment lens that education is acts as an 'authoritative resource' for men, signaling their quality in the marriage market and attracting dowry in all the cases in the form of bequest (as seen

from table 1). On the contrary, it is merely an 'allocative resource' that does not give a choice to make 'strategic decision' to women to analyze their self-worth and stand against social injustice. In the marriage market, education as a resource can give 'passive agency' to choose a groom for a hypergamous and endogamous marriage. However, it cannot give 'active agency' to go against social norms against dowry. Moreover, giving the 'authoritative resource' and 'strategic choices' at the discretion of in-laws to allow if women could work is subjugating to the norms of patriarchy.

#### ***Taking guise of the culture:***

Women in Pakistan are deeply intertwined with the cultural intricacies associated with dowry. Although respondents were educated, some expressed a preference for dowry, perceiving it to maintain a favourable reputation and appease their in-laws. Due to the practice of endogamy in marriages, weddings are often extravagant and costly. This expense is seen as a way for parents to show their love within the cultural norms.

Sara shared her parent's apprehension, *"My parents wanted to let people know that their daughter did not elope, they had their blessings for my marriage. People cannot see blessings? But yes, they can see the stuff parents bought for her. However, she did acknowledge her in-laws from refraining her to bring anything over, "I really value my in-laws for not asking me to bring anything at all, people are usually not like this"*

While Asma defending the cultural practice of dowry said, *"In our culture we must provide dowry, if people do not see anything being unloaded from the truck, the community members may think that the parents are not happy with the marriage. It brings shame and bad name to the family as we live in a very close-knit neighborhood."*

Hina while showing her parent's love said *"My parents used to say how would we know that you are not maltreated in case we do not send what you need? Afterall, this was to make my life easy afterwards because they knew I will not be asking for things on my own"*

Notably, the gifts are presented from only the bride's side of the family. The absence of reciprocity emphasizes a unidirectional commitment to familial harmony and illustrate the intricate challenges that women confront when balancing cultural pressures and societal standards. It was mentioned that the custom of exchanging gifts does not end with matrimony: *"Gifts are showered upon the groom's family on birthdays, Eids, the birth of grandchildren, and numerous other significant occasions."* Meena declared.

Regarding one-way transaction of gifts, Sara and Iqra simply put the onus on the existing traditions and culture. Sara said, *"Since it's the farewell of a daughter, as a gesture of good will, parents want to bid her off with presents. It is considered shagun (good omen) to share gifts with in-laws as a start of new chapter"*

Given that a significant portion of the interviewees predominantly adhere to a joint family system, they experience substantial influence and interference from their extended in-laws. Typically, married women in Pakistan cohabit with their parents in law, unmarried siblings, as well as married sons and their offspring. There exists an informal competition among the daughters-in-law regarding the perceived value of the dowry bestowed by the bride's parents.

Iqra shared the experience of one of her acquaintances, *"Women who bring a lower dowry are often subjected to mockery, ridicule, and diminished worth within the joint family."*

Parents exhibit apprehension towards this circumstance and offer dowry to circumvent this unfavorable predicament. Asma shared her own personal experience, *"we are three daughters in law. We all have brought what we needed with us to make our lives easy. In a joint family you can't just borrow things. There is a formality between us and we must maintain our dignity"*

In the sociocultural context, the phrase *"log kia kahain gay (what will people think)?"* was repeated by Sara and Hina showing concern that people judge and mock those who fail to send their daughters empty handed. *"Sometimes your younger sisters have to bear the brunt as they don't attract marriage proposals in future because society is too judgmental, they think we don't have enough means"*

#### ***Discussion: Manifestation of Doxa***

This issue can be analyzed through what Bourdieu (1977) calls "Doxa". Doxa, as previously stated, pertains to the cultural components that have become ingrained within our societal framework as normative and for granted.



Moving away from doxa to discourse, or developing greater critical thinking, is contingent upon individuals being exposed to alternative methods of doing things and living. The emergence of alternative possibilities disrupts the conventional wisdom, exposing that which is truly fixed is rather a product of societal decisions as noted by Kabeer (1999).

An illustration of how women internalise their own inferior status in society and subsequently discriminate against other females is through their adherence to social norms and practices associated with the oppressive exercise of authority by in-laws. Although one could argue that dowry in this instance represents "choice," these choices are also influenced by and serve to perpetuate the subordinate position of women. This observation underscores the notion that power dynamics are manifested not just via the exercise of agency and choice, but also via the nature of choices that individuals take. This concept demonstrates how dominance and power can function not only via coercion and conflict, but also via consent and complicity (Kabeer, 1999).

The perpetuation of the gender binary in which one individual is expected to bestow wedding gifts and the other is expected to receive them undermines the status of women, strips away the essence of empowerment, and grounds it in material possessions. Moreover, this unidirectional exchange of presents from the bride to the groom is considered a godforsaken rule and is justified as a tradition by most families.

#### ***Effects of modernization:***

One of the emerging themes underpinning the need for financial empowerment was that of modernization. The interview narratives consistently addressed the issue of inflation, which served to underscore the consequences of modernization and widespread consumerism. Everyone agreed that maintaining a desired standard of living amidst economic challenges associated with modernization presents a multitude of complex obstacles.

Hina while showing the need for double income said, *"In this age both men and women need to work, therefore many grooms seek working wives"*

Sara with regards to financial independence told *"My parents always taught us to be independent and not be a burden on anyone"* She further said *"The job I had gave me the luxury of choosing whatever living style I wanted"*

Iqra too concurred, *"In the economic reality that we are now facing, the need for double income is very rapidly becoming a reality. Earlier in a single income, parents could provide the same lifestyle that their parents provided. But now if you don't work, you are going to give half the living standards to your children. So, it is an economic reality that a lot of women need to work"*

Asma while assuming her role as a mother replied, *"considering that you studied from Beaconhouse (a posh school in Islamabad), you would want your children to get equally good education"*

Meena shared, *"People don't respect housewives anymore. "Women who are financially independent and work earn respect from their in-laws and teach their children to be strong in the future."*

#### ***Discussion: Distress sale of labour***

In the contemporary era of modernization, specifically in the realm of education, the concept of "empowerment" is frequently linked to the acquisition of labor market skills (Freire, 1973; Stromquist, 2015). This is what Kabeer calls "distress sale of labor" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). This limitation is attributed to the demands of a capitalist, neoliberal paradigm, where the necessity for both spouses to participate in the labor market arises from the desire of a better living standards instead of emerging labor market opportunities for women (Kabeer, 2015). Moreover, there is no negotiation of domestic roles and double burden on women fall upon them because of labor participation, which ultimately affects their wellbeing (ibid).

On one hand we want more women to participate in labor market due to modernization, but on the other hand we see the schools and curriculum reproducing orthodoxy confining them to reproductive roles only (as reviewed by literature earlier). Women find themselves at the cusp of modernization and institutional orthodoxy.

In a male dominated society, fruits of modernization are not reaped equally among men and women. Although, women are coerced to assume their role in paid work, there are seldom any conducive opportunities. Women are sexually harassed and may not be paid equally (Javed et al., 2022). Gender disparities in work demands seem to have been exacerbated overall. Female employees are either prohibited from unionising or lack the leisure to do so, despite the collaborative nature of their work (Kabeer, 2005). So, employment is not for self-nurturing prospects, but only to meet the increasing demands of modern world.

#### **Role of Bride's mother:**

The reason for inquiring about mother's education was to analyze if transformational agency was practiced by them. Mother's role in dowry provision or deterrence was critically analyzed amidst interview question while keeping empowerment framework in mind.

Hina replied, *"I got few of the dinner sets that my mother kept for me since I was in tenth grade."*

The respondents stressed that both of their parents, especially their mothers wanted them to get educated. Sara commented, *"my mother always wanted her sons and daughters to be educated equally and be self-sufficient."*

Iqra said, *"my mother always wanted us to be professionals and be the best of what we do. There was no restriction in our home to choose what professions we want to go in."*

Meena said that, *"my mother was herself a working woman, she wanted all her children to be financially independent. Both of my parents worked hard to give us best education and quality of life."*

#### **Discussion: Lack of transformational agency:**

Considering the interviews, it is evident that "effective agency" was exercised by mothers to provide daughters with "allocative resources" in the form of financial means and education. However, the choices made by daughters, while influenced by their mothers' effective agency, were 'non-strategic.' According to Kabeer (1999), there is a direct link between poverty and disempowerment. While the respondent group of privileged white-collar women is not disempowered, the lack of strategic choices suggests restricting in their empowerment, as they are not challenging the existing status quo. Moreover, there is a lack of transformational agency on behalf of mothers, which perpetuates the same inequalities in the next generation as experienced by the mothers themselves (Kabeer, 2005).

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This research examines the complex intricacies of dowry practices within the Pakistani context, questioning the widely held notion that education is the sole solution for effecting societal transformation. Marriage markets in patriarchal societies unequivocally benefit males, thereby reinforcing the notion that societal value is determined by labour capabilities. The findings of the research demonstrate that even financially independent and highly educated women attribute a price tag to the groom due to the hypergamous character of the marriage market.

A comprehensive examination of education as an enabler for orthodox discourse reveals that formal education has fallen short of its capacity for social change. Schools, which are frequently criticised for propagating orthodox values, face difficulties in imparting knowledge that enables female students to not only succeed in the workforce but also question established social injustices.

The research utilised semi-structured interviews with economically independent women to examine the impact of education on the development of self-awareness and critical thinking regarding dowry. The alarming prevalence of dowry abuse in Pakistan serves as a clear manifestation of this deficiency. To combat the perpetuation of social ills such as dowry, the research emphasizes the necessity of a curriculum and education system overhaul. Consistent with Nussbaum's advocacy for "real education" to counteract social injustices such as dowry, the research indicates that policy planners frequently overestimate the significance of education. This calls for a paradigm shift. This necessitates a paradigm shift as education, in its current form, is not inherently empowering but rather a pathway to maintaining endogamous marriage practices.

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