

BEYOND THE MOTHERHOOD MANDATE: EXAMINING THE FACTORS THAT SHAPE THE SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF INVOLUNTARY CHILDLESS WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Involuntary childlessness adversely affects the lives of women on a global scale, including in Pakistan. In many cultures motherhood is seen as a social obligation, central to women's roles. This study conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 19 childless women to examine the cultural, societal, and individual factors that shape their self-perceptions. The findings revealed that cultural norms and social attitudes significantly influenced how childless women perceive themselves coped with these cultural and relational pressures. The interviewees experienced social pressure, stigma, and discrimination from family and community, particularly in-laws and husbands, negatively impacting their self-esteem. Additionally, values, religiosity, and economic conditions further contribute to how women perceive themselves and their situation, with some experiencing guilt, shame, and mental health challenges. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape the self-perceptions of involuntary childless women, highlighting the importance of a holistic approach that considers cultural, societal, and individual factors in addressing this issue in the context of the SDGs, specifically Goal 5: Gender Equality, and Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being.

Keywords: Infertility, Involuntary childlessness, Pakistani women, Stigmatization, Non-parenthood.

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood has traditionally been regarded as a crucial element of womanhood in numerous cultures, including Pakistan. According to recent data from the World Health Organization (2023), approximately 17.5% of adults in developed countries and 16.5% in developing countries experience infertility, affecting approximately 1 in 6 individuals worldwide. In countries with patriarchal norms, such as Pakistan, childlessness can be especially challenging as women are expected to bear children in order to maintain the family line (Iram et. al., 2021). As a result, in many communities, childlessness is stigmatized and seen as a sign of personal failure or a problem within the family.

In Pakistani society, motherhood is valued highly, and women are typically expected to prioritize their mothers' obligations. (Qureshi, 2014). Women who are unable to have children may face social pressure since they may be viewed as inadequate or worthless (Jabeen, 2018). Due to these cultural expectations, women who are unable to have children may experience extreme pressure. Moreover, in

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Pakistani society, the stigma of childlessness is also frequently gendered, with women being regarded more responsible for infertility. This can make it more difficult for childless women to feel secure in themselves (Khalid, 2017). In Pakistan, women who are unable to have children may feel pressure from their family and community, which can impact their ability to adjust socially and result in emotional distress (Gonzalez, 2000). In Pakistan, childless women are frequently marginalized and subjected to prejudice (Jabeen, 2018). According to research, childless women in Pakistan experience discrimination and stigma, which could negatively affect their mental health and general wellbeing (Ahmed, 2019; Mustafa & Iqbal, 2020).

The marginalization of childless women in Pakistan is strongly embedded in patriarchal norms and beliefs which result in cultural pressure on them to have children (Mard, 2020; Graham et al., 2019; Jabeen, 2018). According to research, childless women in Pakistan frequently experience prejudice and social stigma, which can negatively affect their social adjustment and self-perception (Saeed & Fatima, 2021; Jabeen, 2018). According to a study conducted in India, women who are childless may be stigmatized and treated unfairly since they are seen as incomplete or aberrant (Khan, 2020). Similar to this, women in Iran may be viewed as failing in their roles as mothers and wives if they do not have children (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2013). This emphasizes the necessity of addressing the social pressures and stigmas related to childlessness as well as of fostering acceptance and inclusivity for all people, regardless of their reproductive choices.

These studies demonstrate how complex societal, cultural, and individual circumstances, as well as experiences of childless women themselves, shape their self-perception and social adjustment. There are number of factors that affect the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of childless women that influence how they perceive themselves. These issues encompass social, cultural, and personal factors that affect how childless women perceive themselves in diverse ways.

The first factor that significantly influences how childless women perceive themselves is cultural norms and attitudes. Motherhood is frequently regarded as a central role for women in various countries, including Pakistan, and having children is seen as a societal obligation (Naqvi, 2016). Women who are infertile or have not yet given birth may experience stigma and discrimination because they may be seen as incomplete or unfulfilled (Khalid, 2017). Since having children is frequently regarded as a crucial component of a woman's identity and femininity, childless women may experience cultural shame and discrimination (Qamar, 2018). Childless women may experience a sense of loss or inadequacy if they are unable to fulfil this position since cultural expectations may support the idea that a woman's main role is to be a mother and carer (Niazi et al., 2017). Furthermore, cultural expectations of gender roles may further support the notion that having children will elevate a woman's status and win her respect, which has a profound effect on how childless women view themselves (Raza et al., 2019).

Islam, the prevalent religion in Pakistan also considers marriage and procreation as a social and religious obligations, attitudes towards childlessness may also impacted religious convictions. As a result, women who are childless may be discriminated and have poor impressions of themselves and feel like they have failed to live up to society's expectations (Sultana, 2018). Due of their inability to meet societal ideals of motherhood, cultural norms may help childless women internalize unfavorable ideas of themselves (Bibi, 2016). This cultural influence on childless women's self-perspectives is not unique to Pakistan; it is seen in international literature as well, where similar cultural norms and beliefs affect women's perceptions of childlessness in various countries (Inhorn, 2012).

Second, pressures from family and society can have an impact on how childless women perceive themselves. As childbirth is frequently considered as a continuation of the family line and a source of pride and honor in many societies, social pressure from family, friends, and community members can be especially damaging (Inhorn, 2012). Childless women may experience societal stigma, prejudice, and ostracism, all of which can be detrimental to their sense of worth and self-esteem (Khan, 2015; Kwaghtser, 2023). Furthermore, as marriage and motherhood are frequently strongly entwined in Pakistani society, childlessness can have an influence on a woman's marital position and relationships. Childless women may feel inadequate and they may face marital stress and pressure in their relationships with their in-laws (Tariq, 2018). Family and cultural views on childlessness might therefore influence how childless women perceive themselves by helping them internalize social norms and ideas (Tariq, 2018).

Thirdly, each childless person's unique experiences with childlessness have an impact on how they view themselves. For childless women, problems like infertility, miscarriages, or other reproductive health issues can lead to mental discomfort, feelings of inadequacy, and diminished self-esteem (Zaman et al., 2016). Due to their failure to conceive or have children, these women may also struggle with internal issues, such as guilt or shame, and may question their femininity or identity (Niazi et al., 2017; Inhorn, 2012; Ali et al., 201). Individual characteristics, such as personal views, values, and coping mechanisms, also have an impact on how childless women perceive themselves. Others, however, might defy social conventions and cultivate good self-perceptions by discovering meaning and purpose in their lives outside of parenting (Tariq, 2018; Gerrits et al., 2016). Coping mechanisms include looking for social support, finding alternate sources of fulfillment, and building resilience can have an impact on how childless women perceive themselves (Zaman et al., 2016; Kwaghtser, 2023). Along with cultural, institutional, and familial influences, personal experiences and coping techniques are significant in determining how childless women view themselves.

In conclusion, a complex interplay of societal, cultural, and personal factors may influence how childless women perceive themselves. The self-perceptions of childless women are influenced by societal views, personal beliefs, and coping mechanisms as well as cultural conventions and beliefs. In order to better comprehend the complex nature of this problem and identify practical solutions to improve the welfare of childless women in Pakistan and other nations, requires further research.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was carried out to examine how involuntary childless women perceived themselves and how they understood their circumstances in the context of the complex interactions between societal, cultural, and personal factors. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit detailed information from the individuals. To ensure that many viewpoints were represented, the participants were purposefully chosen using a snowball sampling technique. A total of 19 interviews were conducted up until data saturation was reached, which meant that no new information was surfacing anymore.

A female researcher who was sensitive to the topic's cultural subtleties and sensitivities conducted the interviews. The interviews lasted between forty minutes to over an hour were audio recorded. Depending on the participant's preferred language, they were conducted in a combination of Punjabi and Urdu languages. Participants were provided guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity, and their privacy was maintained at all times. Two researchers transcribed and translated the audio recordings into English after the interviews to ensure precision and uniformity. Thematic analysis, which involves finding patterns and themes in the transcribed data, was then used to examine it. With the help of this method, the experiences of childless women were thoroughly explored, providing insightful information about their self-perception and the sociocultural and personal variables affecting it.

FINDINGS

Self-perceptions are shaped through many micro and macro factors including social interactions, individual experiences, culture, societal expectations, internal thought processes and beliefs, personality, and socialization. This dynamic process evolves throughout an individual's life and can be influenced by a range of internal and external factors. In this study, the participants were asked about their self-perception in the context of involuntary childlessness, with the aim of understanding how these perceptions were formed and influenced by their unique experiences and perspectives.

All participants reported experiencing lower self-esteem in the context of being childless, though to varying degrees. The literature has also shown that childless women may experience a decline in self-worth as a result of insensitive societal norms and expectations around motherhood. The participants expressed a range of factors that impacted their self-esteem, including their personal ideals of womanhood, their deep love for children, feelings of guilt for not being able to fulfill their husband's desire for a child, loss of hope due to medical limitations, and societal and familial reactions to their childlessness.

Cultural Expectations and emotional pain of childless women

In Pakistan, cultural norms and societal expectations exert a significant impact on women's self-perceptions with regards to childlessness. The participants in our study highlighted that motherhood is considered an essential aspect of womanhood in Pakistan, and they felt stigmatized or judged by their families and communities for being childless. They further discussed how the concept of motherhood is deeply ingrained in societal norms and values, resulting in pressure on many participants to become mothers immediately after getting married. As Rabia², 45 years old and married for 18 years shared:

In Pakistan, there is no question of whether one wants to have children or not, but rather when. When I was younger, I used to get annoyed by my younger siblings and cousins, and I would say that I would never have children of my own. However, any elder around would scold me and to never say that there is no life without children, and they would lecture me on the importance of having children.

Many participants shared that the importance of becoming a mother is deeply internalized in their minds from a young age, and they cannot imagine thinking otherwise. Some participants also discussed the role of media in shaping these values. As Madeeha, age 33, shared:

Have you not seen Pakistani and Indian dramas and films? Every second one has this topic, and when they show a childless woman, she is always portrayed as a victim, a poor miserable woman always crying. I do not like showing my emotions to everyone, so if I ever say that I do not care if I have children, people get shocked and think I am heartless because they cannot imagine someone being okay with being childless. We love seeing people miserable.

Having children is often viewed as the natural next step after marriage, and our participants shared that they felt pressured to have children early on in their marriage. As Ammara, married for four years shared:

A couple of months after my marriage, wherever we went, the first question people asked was if there was any news of a baby. They asked so often that without wanting to, you start feeling pressured. Once, after six months into my marriage, I asked my mother if something was wrong with me and if I should see a doctor. She scolded me and said, 'Are you crazy? It's only been a few months.

Some participants talked about demeaning cultural terminologies around childlessness in our cultural discourse. Many participants particularly mentioned the term "*banjh*," which refers to an infertile woman. Parveen, a 35-year-old working woman who has been married for 5 years, shared her feelings of hurt for being called this term.

I went to a wedding and was about to put mehndi on the bride when an elderly relative stopped me and angrily said, "What are you doing? You can bring bad luck to the bride." She then started mumbling to the bride's mother, "Why do you let these women come near the bride?" I had never been so humiliated in my life. After that incident, I decided to stop going to weddings.

Similarly, Zeenat, a 39-year-old, living in an extended family and married for 17 years, has been medically diagnosed as infertile, added:

I have known for years that I'll never be able to have children yet, it hurts every time someone brings it up. Particularly my mother-in-law has a tendency to bring up the subject often and says that my poor son's lineage has been lost. It makes me feel bad and useless.

Children, especially sons, are also seen as a source of a secure marriage in Pakistani culture. Divorce and second marriage of a man due to infertility of his wife is considered acceptable and justified in Pakistan, and all participants personally knew people in their communities who had gone through it. As one participant shared:

It is quite common, you know. In fact, it's uncommon for men not to do it. A man who doesn't remarry after his wife's infertility is seen as a rarity. People tell me all the time that

² The participants are given fictitious names to maintain anonymity.

I am lucky to have a husband who has not left me or remarried, while at the same time warning me to be cautious as it could happen at any time.

Many participants mentioned a lack of respect for personal space in Pakistani culture, where in addition to family and friends, even strangers, ask questions and pass judgments without hesitation. This was explained by Kalsoom, a working woman in her thirties:

In Pakistan, whether you are on a bus, in a park, or at an executive meeting, complete strangers may ask you about children. If you tell them that you do not have any, they may blatantly ask why not and what is wrong. Even if you try to change the subject or look uncomfortable, they may not stop. This can be hurtful and embarrassing at times.

Another participant, Tahira, married for 14 years, had a similar experience:

People not only sympathize with you, but they also show pity and make you feel further insecure by asking if your husband is planning to remarry or what the attitude of your in-laws is. They may even start sharing horror stories of how a childless woman they know was left by her husband who remarried. They may do it in front of your husband and in-laws, putting ideas in their heads.

In short, cultural values and norms play a significant role in shaping people's desire for children, particularly biological. These values and norms are often gendered and emphasize the importance of motherhood for women, making it a central aspect of their lives. Children are also seen as providing security to women in their marriages, reducing the risk of divorce or a husband taking another wife, as well as ensuring economic and social security in old age. These internalized societal values and norms can directly and indirectly impact women's self-concept, leading them to believe they are failures in society despite their successes in other areas of life such as work or skills.

Familial Relations: a source of Stigma and Support for Women Experiencing Childlessness:

The influence of family, particularly the in-laws, on the self-perception of childless women in Pakistan can be significant and multifaceted, as they often hold authority and influence over the decisions and actions of the couple. In-laws, including the husband's parents, siblings, and extended family, play a crucial role in shaping the self-perception of the participants, as most participants mentioned the mother-in-law and sister-in-law in particular. The findings reveal that a majority of participants experienced negative attitudes, varying in intensity, from their in-laws due to their childlessness, which in turn affects their self-perception. Among the in-laws, participants commonly complained about the attitude of their mothers-in-law, who were most vocal on the issue, while other in-laws, except for the husband, were less direct. The husband, for most participants, plays a pivotal role not only through his own behavior but also as a buffer or shield between the wife and the family and society.

Participants shared that they face criticism, social stigma, or pressure from their in-laws, which contributes to self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and a negative impact on self-perception for childless women. Huma, a 32-year-old housewife, explained:

I try to avoid my mother-in-law as she never stops taunting me. She constantly complains that she will pass away without seeing her grandchildren and that there will be no one to carry on her son's name in this world. I never get a break because I am living in a joint family system.

Another participant, Huma, a 32-year-old housewife, living with extended family and married for 5 years, added:

The only question my mother-in-law is, "When are you going to the doctor again?" I want to shout back, stop asking me this question for the millionth time. I wonder if I mean anything to them if I cannot give them any child. The five years I have spent with them mean anything. No one asks my husband this question, why just me. It is just cruel to discriminate against women in this way.

Some participants also shared about facing comments during family gatherings, especially during children's birthday parties, where other relatives often make insensitive remarks both consciously and

unconsciously. Hina, a 34-year-old working woman who has been married for 5 years and lives in a nuclear family system, shared:

The parties at my relatives' houses are always filled with people who make comments. They ask odd questions, especially the elderly aunties who often inquire about when I am planning to have a baby or if I am undergoing any treatments. It suffocates me.

Not all women had negative experiences with their in-laws and considered them a positive force in their lives. As Tasneem, a 38-year-old housewife who has been childless for 15 years of marriage, mentioned: 1 time

Whenever I get upset or cry, my mother-in-law tells me to have trust in Allah. She always prays for us and shuts down any relatives who make comments about my childlessness.

My in-laws have been really supportive to me. In fact, they are my pillar of support.

In-laws may also have a significant influence on decisions related to traditional or medical treatments and adoption for childless women. In many cases, in-laws may hold traditional beliefs or cultural norms that limit or prohibit certain options, such as seeking medical assistance for infertility or adopting a child. This can further impact the self-perception of childless women, as they may feel helpless or trapped in their situation due to the influence of their in-laws. Farah, a 35-year-old housewife married for seven years, faced strong resistance to adopting a child shared, "My in-laws including my husband believe that only biological children can be your own children. The suggestion of adopting a kid was never welcomed by my husband. A similar statement was made by Saima, a 34-year-old working woman who has been married for seven years: "We once considered adoption, but eventually dropped the idea because of the strong negative reaction by our close relatives and some friends."

When discussing the reasons for resistance against adoption, participants believed that the culture is not very supportive of the idea. Zeenat, 39 years old woman married for 17 years, shared that even her own family, in addition to her in-laws, were against the idea. She explained: There is not a single reason. Firstly, there were discussions about how if we adopt a son, he will become '*namehram*' for me after a certain age, and if we adopt a daughter, for my husband. Then there are concerns about family inheritance, and lastly, the lamest reason of blood lineage. We could have adopted against the family's wishes, but we don't live in isolation, and we wouldn't want an innocent child to face teasing or discrimination. That was my breaking point, when all hopes of becoming a mother were lost.

The influence of in-laws on the self-perceptions of childless women in Pakistan can be complex and diverse. While some in-laws may reinforce societal expectations and contribute to negative self-perceptions, others may be understanding and supportive. It's important to recognize the individuality of each situation and the impact of cultural and societal norms in shaping the self-perceptions of childless women in Pakistan. Providing support, empathy, and understanding to childless women, regardless of their in-laws' attitudes, can be crucial in promoting positive self-perceptions and mental well-being in this context.

In addition to the in-laws, husbands are also play a crucial in shaping the experiences of childless women. The husband's role is important as he can serve as a shield between his wife and his family, providing much-needed support to his wife. Participants shared their experiences regarding the role of their husbands in terms of support, acceptance, and how they deal with the situation. Sultana 37, married for 10 years and a house-wife living in a nuclear family system shared

You can tolerate all the taunts and other mean comments with a smile if you know that your husband is standing behind you. But if the husband himself is being nasty about the whole thing, then you feel lost. Initially my husband would be irritable and angry all the time. He would stay out more and became distant. This would make me feel guilty and angry at myself. I thought my marriage was over, but then after a few years, I guess he just accepted it and stopped reacting as much.

Some participants shared that the acceptance of childlessness and loss of hope led to a loss of emotional bond and sexual interest with their partners. Bilqees, a 36-year-old working woman living in a nuclear family system, married for 12 years, shared:

Is sexual intimacy only meant for conceiving a child and not for being with each other?

My husband has no interest in me anymore.

Many participants talked about their husbands being unsupportive and not getting medical checkups to determine which of the partner has the problem. This leads to the burden of responsibility falling on women who is held responsible for being childless. Many participants shared that if the husband is the one with the problem, the wives continue to stay with them and accept being childless as their fate. However, if it is the other way around, women face abuse, guilt, or a threat of divorce, taking a second wife.

Almost all participants expressed fear about the possibility of their husband's potential remarriage always at the back of their minds. Some also talked about the role of their in-laws in encouraging their sons. Javeria's husband has already remarried for children after 15 years of their marriage. Saima, a 34-year-old working woman who had been married for seven years, shared her experience:

I try to avoid thoughts of my husband's potential remarriage, but sometimes when I am alone, those thoughts creep in. I worry about the consequences of not having a baby, including the possibility of my husband considering a second marriage.

On the other hand, Irum, a 33-year-old working woman who has been married for six years, did not experience the same insecurity and fear of her husband's potential remarriage. She shared: "There was a time when I was completely lost hope so, I told my husband that you can remarry, but told me that he would never do it."

In short, the finding show that childless women experience criticism and social pressure from in-laws. In addition, they also have a significant influence on the couple's decision-making whether they live in nuclear or joint families. This can have a detrimental impact on their self-perception and lead to feelings of inadequacy and inadequacy. These issues are made more difficult by gender relations, extended families, and a lack of communication between couple.

The emotional pain is common across the varied demographics of women experiencing childlessness.

In addition to societal and familial factors, individual factors such as individual personalities, personal beliefs, education, financial conditions, religiosity, play a role in shaping the self-perceptions of childless women in Pakistan. Majority of participants believed that motherhood is the ultimate achievement for women, and a woman is only considered accomplished when she becomes a mother. After six years of marriage and no children, Farah, a 34-year-old housewife who lives in an extended family system, confessed feeling inadequate in contrast to other women. She remarked:

I have always loved children and wanted to have many. Now when I see other women with children, I feel incomplete and it hurts. Everyone tells me I am too sensitive but I cannot help it.

Parveen with a successful career and being happily married for 5 years, feels incomplete due to societal pressure to have children.

I have heard this sentiment countless times, that all the successes in life are meaningless if I cannot have a baby. In this country, having children is often seen as the sole criteria of success for women. I am grateful that I have my work to keep me busy and distracted, otherwise I might have gone crazy.

One the other hand, some participants, especially stay at home, shared feeling "useless" and "living a life without any purpose". Faiza, a 35-year-old housewife who has been living in a nuclear family for seven years, expressed: used 1 time

When you are just a couple there is not much work at home. The house work is a monotonous routine. Other women have kids to look after, but my life feel pointless.

Similarly, Bilqees, a 36-year-old working woman living in a nuclear family, married for 12 years, feels lonely.

I have many colleagues and friends but they all have families and different priorities. For me its lonely at home but sometimes it's lonely everywhere.

On the other hand, Wajeaha, a 40-year-old working woman living in a nuclear family, believes in keeping herself busy and not letting overwhelming emotions take over. She stated that with age, she has learnt that she is a strong woman and she does not want to think about the things missing in her life.

Religiosity of women also influences the self-perception of the participants. The data revealed that religiosity influenced women in multiple ways, on one hand, religion gives respect to mothers, both in this world and the afterlife, thus it increases the desire to have children. On the other hand, faith gives hope, encouraging people to accept their destinies. Javeria, a 42-year-old housewife who has been living childless for 20 years, opined:

We are Muslims, and we believe that heaven is beneath the feet of a mother. When a woman bears children and nurtures them successfully, she rises to the highest level. Islam has only ever granted a woman this status. I feel unlucky that I have never experienced it.

The participants' words suggest that society reinforces this view of motherhood. Bano, a 32-year-old working woman who has been childless for 7 years of her marriage, shared:

Prayers and reading Quran helps me feel better. I feel closer to Allah and I talk to him and I feel better, not alone. I try counting my blessings. I cannot complain, Allah has been kind.

I am sure Allah has a better plan for me.

In Pakistan, in the absence of formal old age benefits, children are seen as a source of physical, emotional, and financial support for parents in their later years. Additionally, after the death of a husband, childless women often face issues of inheritance. This was also a factor that affected many participants' self-perception, being a lonely insecure elderly woman with no one to take care of, as Tasneem 38-year-old and married for 15 years put it. She further added:

I would have preferred a son or at the very least a daughter to care for me in my old age, but God has not been kind to me. I do not know what will happen to me. I always pray that I die before my husband so that I go gracefully. I have seen older people without children living miserable lives. That is my worst fear.

A considerable body of research has shown that involuntary childlessness has strong psychological consequences. A majority of the participants faced mental health challenges, experiencing depression, anxiety, and other health issues such as palpitations, loss of appetite, and so on. Tahira, a 37-year-old working woman who has been married for 14 years and lives in a nuclear family remarked, "My life consists solely of a daily struggle to survive, on the inside as well as the outside. I have no profound feelings about anything in life. remarked, "Even the work I do, I'm just doing it like a machine to kill time.

While another participant also talked about her depression:

I don't like going out or even getting out of bed. I do not change clothes for days sometimes. It all seems pointless. My family tells me that I have given up living and I should see a doctor.

In contrast, Wajeeha, a 40-year-old working woman living in a nuclear family, believed in keeping herself busy and not letting the overwhelming emotions overpower her. She stated:

I have grown stronger as I have gotten older, and I don't want to dwell on the things I do not have. I work hard to improve myself in my career. I will no longer allow anyone to judge me.

Some participants convinced themselves that they should look at themselves from perspectives other than being a motherhood." Kalsoom, a 35-year-old working woman who has been living in an extended family system for 8 years of marriage, expressed:

Every month in the early years of our marriage, I hoped for some positive news. It was frustrating and I started to feel like a failure. But now I count my blessings like I am a respected professor at my college and a devoted wife. I have learned to accept the reality and respect myself.

In short, the findings show that social influences, individual beliefs, education, financial circumstances, and religiosity all contribute to the emotional pain experienced by childless women in Pakistan. Motherhood is frequently regarded as the pinnacle of achievement and a source of security in later life. Mental health conditions like anxiety and depression are widespread.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how cultural attitudes and social norms shape voluntary childless women's self-perceptions and emotional well-being in the patriarchal society of Pakistan. The study findings have shown that cultural expectations and societal norms continue to put immense pressure on women to become mothers, and childlessness is stigmatized. Furthermore, women in Pakistan frequently experience the emotional anguish of being childless, which is influenced by cultural, familial, and personal elements like personalities, beliefs, religiosity, socioeconomic circumstances, and religion. Given that being a mother is frequently regarded as the pinnacle of female achievement, women without children frequently report feeling lonely, ineffective, or afflicted by mental health issues including despair and anxiety. It has been observed that religion can both strengthen a woman's desire to become a mother and offer solace and hope. In spite of the difficulties, some people opt to concentrate on other facets of their lives and find fulfilment in "other roles or pursuits."

The results offer some theoretical and empirical contribution to the existing field of knowledge. Such as, studies on traditional patriarchal societies have revealed that children are often regarded as highly valuable. In such societies, where men hold primary positions of power and authority, the birth of a child, especially a male child, is seen as crucial for continuing the family name and lineage, ensuring the family's continuity and stability, and securing the family's wealth and status (Gonzalez, 2000; Jabeen, 2018; Qureshi, 2014). Furthermore, in traditional societies, children are often expected to provide for their parents in their old age and take care of them, making them primary caregivers and supporters of their aging parents, particularly in societies without robust social welfare systems. Thus, birth of a child carries immense social and cultural significance and motherhood is seen as a central aspect of women's roles (Saeed & Fatima, 2021; Mård, 2020; Graham et. al., 2019).

Similarly, our key finding revealed that study participants felt their status and value were frequently dependent on their capacity to have children and their responsibilities as mothers, and that their inability to have children was seen as a loss of status or failing to live up to social standards. More importantly, the experiences of women bring about social, psychological, and emotional difficulties, such as low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion. This work advances our understanding of how, in traditional patriarchal countries, women who are unable to conceive or bear children due to infertility or other health issues experience social exclusion, blame, and even rejection from their family and communities (Saeed & Fatima, 2021; Khan, 2020; Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2013). It also shows how important family, especially in-laws, are in shaping how childless women perceive themselves. In addition, bad attitudes from in-laws, especially mothers-in-law, have affected how people view themselves, causing self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Choices relating to adoption and traditional or medical therapies were sometimes also affected by in-laws, some of whom had conventional ideas or cultural conventions that limited possibilities.

The study advances a new understanding of supportive informal social networks as not all women have negative experiences with in-laws, and some experienced supportive relationship in coping challenges linked to their fertility. Husbands, for instance, have been cited to play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of childless women acting as a buffer or shield between the wife and the family and society. Therefore, it's critical to appreciate how unique each circumstance is. Supporting healthy self-perceptions and mental health can be achieved through showing empathy, support, and compassion for childless women. A useful next step in this area of research would be to examine the pressures and obstacles that childless women face, such as inheritance and a lack of support as they age, as well as their coping mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in a traditional patriarchal country like Pakistan, childlessness is frowned upon and may have negative social ramifications. Voluntary childlessness is viewed unimaginable and a major deviation and may be subject to societal scrutiny and criticism. Women's desires for children are shaped by cultural beliefs and customs, which can have an effect on their emotional health. Children, especially sons, are seen as a source of security in marriage and divorce, and remarriage owing to a wife's infertility is deemed acceptable.

Motherhood is regarded as an integral aspect of womanhood. Lack of respect for personal space leads to unwanted questioning and judgements from strangers and friends.

The experiences that the participants shed light on the psychological and emotional difficulties that Pakistani women who are unable to conceive or bear children undergo. In addition to the lack of formal old age benefits and inheritance concerns for childless women, these women also face the social and cultural expectations of childbirth. Many participants acknowledged facing mental health difficulties as well as feeling stigmatized and condemned by society. While some women tried to adapt by finding alternate sources of identity and meaning in their life, others experienced feelings of regret and shame for not being able to have children. Similarly, some people turned to their faith for solace, others concentrated on their employment or other social obligations.

The results of this study show that there is a need for more awareness and support for Pakistani women who are battling infertility or involuntary childlessness. A supportive atmosphere for childless people can be created by addressing social stigma, encouraging open communication, and empowering husbands as allies. The psychological, emotional, and sociological effects of infertility on women's mental health and well-being must be acknowledged and addressed. The availability of mental health services, social support networks, and laws that protect and uphold the rights of childless women can significantly lessen their difficulties and advance their wellbeing. The achievement of various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goal 5: Gender Equality and Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being, can also be aided by reducing stigma and prejudice against childless women and ensuring access to reproductive healthcare services. By advancing these objectives, we may work to build a more equitable and just society that upholds the rights and wellbeing of all women, including those who are childless or experiencing infertility.

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