MARITAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG CHILDFREE (VOLUNTARY CHILDLESS) WOMEN IN PAKISTAN: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Dr. Anila Mukhtar[1], Sarah Iqbal[2], and Dr. Amena Zehra Ali[3]

ABSTRACT

Fertility and child-rearing are core components of marital success in traditional family structures and societies, such as that of Pakistan. Existing studies have explored marital adjustment, infertility, and satisfaction in various contexts but there is a specific research gap concerning the marital adjustment of childfree/voluntary childless women in Pakistan. This study aims to address the gap by exploring the marital adjustment of childfree women in Pakistan using semi-structured interviews followed by Braun & Clark's (2006) method of thematic analysis. A sample of seven (N=7) childfree working women, aged between 30 and 45 years, was recruited to provide insights into their lived experiences and marital dynamics, resulting in three themes: (a) motivations for voluntary childlessness, (b) its impact on marital adjustment, and (c) the perceived consequences of remaining childfree. We found that voluntary childlessness was mutual between participants and showed high levels of marital satisfaction, even with social pressure.

Keywords: *Childlessness, fertility, voluntary childlessness, childfree women, marital adjustment, Pakistan*

1. INTRODUCTION

Childfree/voluntarily childless women are an unseen part of the Pakistani society. In a culture where a woman is often considered to be less of a woman if she is unable to reproduce, the discussion of childfree women, women that voluntarily decide to not have children, is left out of the equation. When it comes to marital adjustment of childless women, they are subject to various degrees of mistreatment, often to the extent of domestic violence, with the real possibility of divorce. However, the reason behind childlessness is often not elaborated upon, whether infertility or the decision to not have children - and so, the marital adjustment of both of these distinct types of women, is compiled into one, obscuring the unique realities of childfree women. Therefore, to bring to light the experiences of childfree women, it is

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Karachi.
Email: anilamukhtar@uok.edu.pk
[2]Research Fellow,Department of Psychology,University of Karachi.Email: sarah312x@outlook.com
[3]Professor, University of Karachi. Email: azali@uok.edu.pk

important to study them independently, which is the aim of this study - to explore the lived experiences and marital adjustment of childfree women in Pakistan.

Childlessness is defined as the absence of children in an individual's life and includes both voluntary and involuntary childlessness. While involuntary childlessness is the inability to have children due to medical reasons, such as infertility, or any unexplained conditions, voluntary childlessness refers to the choice an individual makes, intentionally, to not have children. Voluntary childlessness is hence often known as being "childfree" (Gouni et al., 2022).

1.1 Marriage

Marriage can be understood as a social institution that enables individuals to live together and start a family while maintaining their societal status (Haq, 2019). It involves rights and responsibilities, allows sexual gratification without societal judgment, and serves as a stable foundation for procreation (Ember et al., 2021). Although historically, this definition has evolved through cultures, as Schultz (1974) illustrates, marriage originated as a means for individuals to enhance their utility by improving household outputs such as meal quality, child-rearing, prestige, recreation, companionship, love, and health, beyond what could be achieved alone.

1.2 Marital Adjustment

Adjustment on marital grounds refers to the understanding and compliance between spouses. As explained through the social exchange theory, there is a certain cost-benefit analysis used in relationships that not only allows individuals to understand the risks and rewards that come with the commitment, but also helps them in deciding whether the exchange feels fair over time and they want to continue the relationship or not (Ahmad et al., 2023). Factors influencing this adjustment that are common across both individualist and collectivist cultures, include cohesion, agreement levels, affection, conflict resolution, intimacy, and overall marital satisfaction which parenthood and fertility play an important role in. (Drentea and Kendrick, 2016; Kazim and Rafique, 2021). However, recent global studies have also found that while parenthood may increase overall well-being, there is a negative correlation between the number of children and marital satisfaction (Kowal et al., 2021). It is also important to note that marital adjustment or the health of a family system is not only dependent on internal dynamics between the spouses but also external dynamics, which exist hierarchically and include, the

individual, family, neighborhood, city/state, nation, and group of nations, as per the family systems theory (Rakow, 2022).

On the other hand, even though marital satisfaction is not dependent on the number of children, in region-specific studies, particularly in Pakistan and South Asia, childlessness is frequently associated with maladjustment, anxiety, depression, social isolation, and even marital dissolution (Qamar & Faizan, 2021; Sherazi et al., 2023). Studies in these regions often focus on social stigmatization, self-blame, and other negative pressures faced by childless women and couples. While these studies typically address women who are infertile or involuntarily childless, such as by Sherazi et al. (2023), Malik et al. (2022) and Malik (2021), some studies, including that by Shabir (2021), Akram and Anwar (2022), and Slamat et al. (2023), do not differentiate between voluntary and involuntary childlessness, leading to a generalized portrayal of the challenges faced by childless women.

1.3 Childlessness

The concept of childlessness is often mistakenly equated with "infertility," although the two terms are distinct. Childlessness refers to the absence of a child or children in an individual's life and can be either voluntary or involuntary (Gouni et al., 2022).

Involuntary childlessness, or infertility, specifically refers to the inability to conceive or have children due to factors such as old age, health issues, or other circumstances beyond the individual's control which can lead to them pursuing fertility treatments, such as In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), surrogacy, or adoption (Cavaliere, 2023).

Voluntary childlessness, on the other hand, is a term used to describe deliberate and intentional decisions that couples or an individual takes to remain childfree, with various measures taken to prevent conception if necessary (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003). While involuntary childlessness involves factors such as infertility, or unexplained medical conditions, voluntary childlessness is not influenced by such factors, although it may involve a desire to focus on careers or the exploration of alternative ways to leave a legacy. (Sakman, 2021).

Historically, in religious and conservative societies, the concept of voluntary childless was met with a lot of resistance – often equating it to a sin or tragic suffering (Park, 2005), stemming from a widespread belief that being childfree means a life that inherently lacks fulfilment and satisfaction (Stahnke et al., 2023). Regardless of what the couple might state about wanting to be childfree, they were presumed to be struggling with infertility, as supported by Campbell (1999) and Sakman (2021).

1.4 Pakistan

Married women in Pakistan that are childless often face harsh treatment which starts from social stigma and extends to social demolition, domestic violence, and divorce, sometimes even being pressured to undergo religious rituals as treatments to address their "evil sickness" (Qamar, 2018). Consequently, the quality of their life diminishes, with lowered economic and social security (Alam et al., 2019). As the Pakistani has evolved, over time, it has also grown in its mistrust of men, where women now have concerns about compromising their individual identity and goals, giving up their own career aspirations for the traditional role of a wife or mother, and this has now led to an increasing number of women choosing not to marry or remain childfree (Rafiq et al., 2022).

1.5 Rationale

Despite this context, there is a large gap in Pakistan's literature where the experiences of couples and women that have chosen to remain childfree are ignored and often summed into infertility. The rationale for this study stems from this significant gap in Pakistani literature regarding the experiences of voluntarily childless women. Within Pakistan's pronatalist culture, women who do not have children may encounter a range of social and marital challenges. However, the experiences of women who choose to remain childfree may differ substantially from those of women who are unable to have children. Therefore, to bring to light the experiences of childfree women, their lived experiences, marital adjustment, and the societal responses to their reproductive choices, it is important to study them independently. Accordingly, in this study, we aim to explore the lived experiences and marital adjustment of voluntarily childless married women in Pakistan by examining (a) their reasons for choosing a childfree life, (b) the impact of this decision on marital adjustment, and (c) societal responses to their choice.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the marital adjustment of women who had voluntarily chosen to remain childfree. A thematic analysis approach was utilized to examine patterns and meanings within participants' narratives during one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

2.2 Participants

Due to the taboo nature, harsh judgment, and religious burden attached to the concept of childlessness in a pronatalist and religious society like Pakistan, most women do not want to speak about this choice that they have made, making it difficult to recruit a large sample size. Our sample consisted of seven voluntarily childless married women between the ages of 30 and 45 years. All participants had been married for a minimum of two years at the time of participation and were working women in urban cities.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling using online women's groups. Individuals with a history of fertility issues were excluded from the study.

2.3 Instruments

2.3.1 Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was administered to collect background information, including age, type of family system (nuclear or joint), educational background, employment status, years of professional work experience, type of marriage (love or arranged), duration of acquaintance prior to marriage, and number of years married.

2.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were developed using social exchange theory (Ahmad et al., 2023) and family systems theory (Rakow, 2022), and included questions on consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression. These domains and questions were adapted to ensure cultural relevance and contextual appropriateness. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their lived experiences while maintaining alignment with the research objectives.

2.4 Procedure

Prior to participation, all individuals were informed about the purpose of the study and provided both verbal and written informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and all data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

Data were collected through individual interviews online, where any identifying information, such as the name, numbers, picture/video, and addresses of the participants was not collected. All responses were compiled and merged into a single dataset for analysis.

The interviews were approximately 45 to 60 minutes long and audio-recorded for transcription purposes, with the participant's consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, after which the original audio files were discarded to maintain confidentiality.

2.5 Data Analyses

Using Braun & Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis including the six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report, we analyzed the lived experiences of the recruited participants. All transcripts were carefully reviewed and coded to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes relevant to the research objectives.

3. RESULTS

Using Braun & Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis, we explored (a) motivations for voluntary childlessness, (b) its impact on marital adjustment, and (c) the perceived consequences of remaining childfree. While all participants reported that remaining childfree was a mutual decision with their spouses, they also described multiple personal, relational, and contextual factors that contributed to arriving at this choice. Furthermore, living in Pakistan, a strongly de facto pronatalist, resulted in various social repercussions that shaped their experiences. In our analysis, three overarching themes were identified: (1) Value-Driven Decision Making, (2) Marital Alignment and Strengthened Relationship, and (3) Social Pressures and External Consequences. The following table provides a summary of the themes we found.

Table no.1: Summary of Results - Themes and Subthemes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Quotes
1. Value-Driven Decision Making	1.1 Career Commitment & Financial Preparedness	"Finances. Emotional and mental state… we are just not cut out…"
	1.2 Preservation of Emotional Intimacy & Couple-Centered Life	"We just want to be able to get up and go… we really value our time." "It helped us both to understand each other well."
	1.3 Ethical & Societal Considerations	"The world is dying… you can't keep your children safe…" "I'd rather foster… than bring new lives into the world."
	1.4 Evolving & Conditional Decision-Making	"If we do want a child in future, adoption is open to us."

2. Marital Alignment & Strengthened Relationship	2.1 Alignment Since the Beginning	"We were very clear in the beginning…" "It was always a mutual decision."
	2.2 Initial Ambivalence & Relational Tension	"Initially, it was me only… but my husband supported me."
	2.3 Negotiation & Communicative Work	"We talk about things and arrive at a solution." "Communication… leads to a happy marriage."
	2.4 Increased Emotional Intimacy & Couple Focus	"We didn't realize how much time we'd have for each other."
3. Social Pressures & External Consequences	3.1 Familial Pressure & Boundary Violations	"How are you not having kids?" "Urging to make a decision ASAP…"
	3.2 Pity & Assumptions of Infertility	"People were looking at me with pity… they thought we couldn't have children."
	3.3 Gendered Expectations	"For women, it's very hard." "My husband took responsibility… so I don't have to…"
	3.4 Social Navigation & Emotional Labor	"I used to avoid spending time… they would always ask about children."
	3.5 Anticipated Social Distance	"It might be hard for them to relate to us and vice versa."

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that marital adjustment and satisfaction are not only maintained but strengthened when the decision of being childfree is mutual, transparent, and rooted in value congruence with ongoing communication. Even with the social norms of Pakistan and being a pronatalist society, are findings are in line with studies conducted globally, supporting that couples can have a healthy relationship, live a fulfilling life (Uğur et al., 2026), and battle social pressure and stigma through mutual understanding and decision-making (Stahnke et al., 2022; Utamidewi et al., 2022). These themes are further analyzed and discussed below.

4.1 Value-Driven Decision Making

This theme reflects the intentional and reflective nature of participants' decision to remain childfree. Although all participants reported mutual agreement with their spouse, the process of arriving at this decision involved multiple personal, relational, and contextual considerations.

4.1.1 Career Commitment and Financial Preparedness

Major factors influencing reproductive decisions included career growth and financial stability. Parenthood was viewed as requiring economic readiness and long-term planning. One participant explained,

I got just married after my graduation…That A4 size sheet degree which we call doesn't qualify you as a person. It doesn't say that you have achieved something apart from that degree. So that was my always thinking that I could go and do some job and build my career. I could be independent. Why should I depend on my husband or my father's money? If my father has already given me something, an education, I could earn myself. I shouldn't be dependent on anybody. (Participant 3)

Three participants emphasized financial and psychological considerations, "Finances. Emotional and mental state. We are just not cut out to be responsible for a child yet" (Participant 4), "General life and yes, the rising expenses / cost of living too. We have always been independent & nuclear" (Participant 6), "My husband's perspective at the time was that he wants to think about it 3-5 years down the road and he would like us to be more financially stable before bringing a child in the mix" (Participant 7).

These responses demonstrate that motherhood was not seen as a natural path after marriage but decided upon by considering resource availability and perceived preparedness. For some, childbearing was conditional upon achieving financial stability.

4.1.2 Preservation of Emotional Intimacy and Couple-Centered Life

Several participants expressed concern that having children might reduce quality time and emotional intimacy within the marriage. Remaining childfree was associated with strengthening the dyadic bond. One participant mentioned wanting to have freedom after retirement:

Our age when we got married …both of us want, you know, after retirement, [to] spend time with each other, travel. And we just want to go somewhere. We want to spend our evenings out. We both of us value that a lot. We want to spend our evenings out. We don't want to think that the child has to sleep…. We just want to be able to get up and go…we really value our time…[when] we want to do something. We should be able to do it without having to think. (Participant 1)

While another stated that it allowed to couple to develop a deeper bond which wouldn't have been possible if they had kids soon after their arranged marriage:

We got some time to understand each other. I was married within three months. I didn't get a chance to understand him, to know him better. It was a surprise for me, who is that person, how his mentality is. Everything was new for me and we took a break from having children. It helped us both to understand each other well. Now we are there to support each other in every

matter…If we would have a child after just marriage, then I don't think so we would have this much of understanding or anything. (Participant 3)

Participants consistently explained that remaining childfree has allowed them more time for each other and the ability to not only remain emotionally connected but also develop a deep mutual understanding that otherwise, would be harder to accomplish due to the lack of support in family systems in Pakistan and could have led to increased stress and reduced couple-centered time.

4.1.3 Ethical and Societal Considerations

Participants stated that their decision was also based on the current global climate where instability coupled with uncertainty simply does not allow one to provide a safe space to raise a child, making this a matter of ethical consideration. One participant stated, "the world population is so much and the world is dying…you can't keep your children safe... so, you have to be there for them forever…on the top of dealing with everything that you have to go through…" (Participant 2), while another shared:

...the world is becoming a terrible place…there are so many children who do not have guardians or parents, if I could foster and make their lives better I rather do that than bringing new lives in the world. I don't think I can have a piece of my heart walking out of my body. I would have anxiety. (Participant 5)

These responses indicate that couples treated the decision of having or not having children as a major decision involving social consciousness rather than it just being about wanting to maintain a certain lifestyle.

4.1.4 Evolving and Conditional Nature of the Decision

Participants acknowledged that there was some room for future reflection and change rather than completely rigidity to their decision of wanting to remain childfree.

Two participants noted, "..we do talk about it. If we do want a child in future, the option of adoption is open to us." (Participant 4) and "We may re-consider having children in future as circumstances [finances] evolve." (Participant 7)

One participant described how they were now planning on having children after achieving financial stability, "now we are stable enough. So now we can do it. Now we have decided to have children after 6 years." (Participant 3)

These responses suggest that being childfree can exist on a continuum and some couples may re-discuss their decision depending on their circumstances.

Analyzing the above subthemes, it is clear that remaining childfree was a mutual decision by couples, based on context and circumstances such as career ambition, financial readiness, emotional intimacy, ethical reflection, and relational alignment. These motivations reflect agency and deliberation rather than avoidance or deficit.

4.2 Marital Alignment and Strengthened Relationship

Theme 2 reflects the communicative process that couples go through to arrive at a shared agreement of being childfree. Some participants shared that the decision required time, negotiation, and open communication; while for others, the decision was clear and mutual from the beginning. This illustrates, and is further explained below, the marital bond of the participants that allowed and improved their relationship, leading to higher marital satisfaction.

4.2.1 Marital Alignment Since the Beginning

For couples that were on the same page from the beginning, early discussions on this sensitive topic played a protective role against future troubles, and allowed clarity and mutual agreement to be established swiftly. Participant 1 emphasized the importance of early transparency:

We were very clear in the beginning because that is not going to happen. Because if it happens and one partner doesn't want it and the other does want it, then in the future, you will have a crack in your relationship. So we were both very clear that it's not going to happen.

Similarly, Participant 7 and Participant 4 stated, "We had a discussion early on around whether either of us have a strong desire to have children and the answer was, NO." and "It was always a mutual decision so it has never affected our relationship."

In some cases, miscarriages and abortions solidified the couples' decisions even further. Participant 6 reflected, "there is nothing to navigate, he agreed early on to not immediately have children, then life happened and after two miscarriages later (one surprise, one planned) we're happy with our childfree life" and participant 2 stated:

So I had a pregnancy scare in the beginning of my marriage as well. And that really solidified it…. We both went through it, me and him. And after I went through the abortion and everything, everything got cleared up. I got a really good birth control as well… It costs some amount of money. And then,

because you can't tell anybody around you since it's a taboo, so you have to go through it pretty much alone. So it's problematic. So that's why I was like, this can never happen again.

This indicates that early value alignment helped in avoiding confusion and possible conflict. Being on the same page since the beginning allowed couples to build a relationship on trust and respect and eliminated the possibility of future regrets or unmet expectations.

4.2.2 Initial Ambivalence and Relational Tension

For some participants, the decision to remain childfree involved negotiation, emotional tension, and uncertainty, all of which was resolved through communication to reach a mutual understanding and achieve marital satisfaction.

Participant 3 described career and financial considerations central to her decision, "..it was the career mostly and then the financial... Initially, it was me only, but my husband didn't deny it. He respected my decision and he also supported me in that." Participant 2 explained that her husband's perspective shifted after witnessing his sister's difficult pregnancy experience:

Individually it took him some time as I told you…But then his sister had a child and he saw what she went through. She was really sick. It was during COVID. And he saw, like she stayed at their place for quite some time and he was sick of it. And he was like, I genuinely thought about it, sat down and thought like, what if this was my life? And what if, you know, my wife had to go through all these things? And what if this is something permanent that I have? And he also realized that he actually does not want a child.

As per these narratives, marital alignment is an evolving process shaped by various experiences and observations in life. The participants were able to resolve these tensions using communication and always held a respect for their partner's autonomy. Any changes that came about were gradual and ultimately strengthened the marital bond.

4.2.3 Negotiation and Communicative Work

Participants reported communication to be one of the biggest factors relating to their marital adjustment and satisfaction. Repeated discussions on being childfree were had so that both partners were comfortable and aligned on the matter.

Participant 7 reflected on the foundational role of communication in her marriage, "Communication. This is something I have implemented in my life because of my husband who is very big on open and honest communication. We talk about things and arrive at a solution."

Similarly, Participant 3 underscored communication as the cornerstone of marital satisfaction:

It [communication]is always fruitful. We don't think it's a challenge. We haven't had any challenges in communicating. We both think that it is the only key that we can say that leads to a happy marriage if we are communicating. Giving the silent treatment or anything, I don't think so.

Participant 2 described using communication to restore fairness and balance within the relationship, "Basically if something seems unfair, we talk about it and we find a balance. That is acceptable to me and acceptable to both of us."

Communication functioned as relational labor, as described by several participants. Instead of avoiding difficult conversations, the focus of these participants and their spouses was on problem-solving and discussing the decision of being childfree to ensure that both were compatible on the matter. Through this, participants experienced high marital satisfaction as they not only felt mutual respect, but also emotional safety and shared agency.

4.2.4 Increased Emotional Intimacy and Couple-Centered Focus

Many participants explained that not having children meant more time for each other and felt that their relationship was strengthened by this ability to prioritize each other no matter what. It allowed both participants to be invested wholly in the marital dyad, with all of their energy, time, and resources. Participant 3 reflected on the depth of mutual understanding that emerged, "It helped us both to understand each other well. Now we are there to support each other in every matter. If somebody is talking anything, we know that person can never say such things."

Participant 6 highlighted shared values and the expanded relational freedom, "We've always had shared goals and values. Where we didn't, we take the time to understand the other's perspective. We're happy and I don't think either of us thought how much freedom and time we'd have for each other…" Participant 1 described how navigating new and difficult experiences together strengthened their bond:

It was our first time [trying a new activity]. We were both very bad at it. But I think it did strengthen our bond. Because we were also helping each other. We learnt something new. We did something new together. We had a good laugh about it. But it also helped us to be there for each other in case something serious happened.

Participant 7 emphasized emotional alignment and commitment independent of parenthood:

Emotionally we are on the same page, we are each others partners and best friend. Not having children for the sake of just having them has helped us build a strong foundation without any external forces (like children). We know we are committed to this relationship with or without children.

The above accounts challenge assumptions that are often made regarding fulfilment in a marriage or adulthood only being achieved by becoming a parent. Instead, participants explained that not having children allowed them to strengthen their friendship and establish a deeper bond with their partner, resulting in improved emotional intimacy. For the participants in this study, the absence of children wasn't a deficit but an opportunity to build a better relationship with more focus on oneself and their partner. Analyzing the above accounts, it is clear that relational quality depended on a shared life vision, adaptive communication, and sustained emotional investment, rather than parenthood.

Theme 2 further establishes the importance of communication in reaching higher marital satisfaction. The decision to remain childfree evolved over time through emotional and communicative labor. While there was some tension reported, this did not predict long-term dissatisfaction as both partners were able to communicate through it, ending with strengthened relational cohesion.

In this sample, marital satisfaction was shaped by value congruence, open dialogue, mutual respect, and collaborative decision-making. Being childfree was not seen as a marital deficit, but a way of life that both partners chose together.

4.3 Social Pressures and External Consequences

While participants were able to patiently and smoothly address internal conflicts, social pressures were described to be much higher and responsible for most of the strain on the relationship. This was expected as participants understood that they were deviating from normative reproductive expectations and so created firm barriers to entry in their personal life.

In Theme 3, we evaluate the sociocultural challenges that the participants face as a childfree couple in a pronatalist society. The participants reported facing pity, peer pressure, intrusive questioning, and subtle social exclusion, from family and friends. This meant that there was an unseen burden on the participants and their spouses to justify their decision of not having children while knowing that there was never a good enough justification. This highlights that the primary challenges faced by a childfree couple are not what they face within the relationship but the expectations of their social circles.

4.3.1 Familial Pressure, Intrusion, and Boundary Violations

Participants explained that having children was treated as a marital obligation in their families and that any deviation from it resulted in moral judgement or just complete disbelief. This often involved intrusive questioning and commentary from extended family members, especially towards the women.

Participant 1 described repeated confrontation from both families:

Take a look at our relationship with in-laws…Oh God…like how are you not having kids like I mean you know Pakistani families right like how are you not having kids what do you mean you don't want kids… my uncle even said to me like did you just get married to have sex if you don't want to have kids…It has strained my relationship with my family and with his family so they just don't talk about it anymore… some of my family I have stopped talking to because they don't have any other topic except to lecture me.

In some cases, such as that of Participant 1, boundary violations extended to highly personal advice, "My mom was once giving me advice that such sexual positions your chances increase and I was like what happened to you."

Participant 7 described persistent but normalized pushback, "We (me specifically) do get push back from extended families to start a family but overall most people have been just normally pushy… urging to make a decision ASAP because age is a factor."

The above accounts show that having a child after marriage was not only expected but, in many ways, enforced by families, which required couples to establish firm boundaries.

4.3.2 Pity and Perception of Infertility

Even after explaining their decision to remain childfree, many participants described being treated as infertile or as though they were just pretending to not want to have children. For a pronatalist society, voluntary childlessness didn't seem to exist and was only seen as a strategy to hide biological inability.

Participant 3 explained, "Initially people were looking at me with pity eyes that they are like poor souls. They don't get a child or they are not able to get it. They will be childless."

She described cultural assumptions within the South Asian context, "If somebody has decided not to have a child, they look at them as a poor soul. They are not getting a child. They can't have them. It's like that. Go to the gynecologist, consult a urologist." Over time, she began directly asserting her

decision, "I was the person who told everybody that we don't want to have it. We will have it once we want to. Then everybody was like quiet."

These narratives reveal that voluntary childlessness was often reframed by family members as a deficiency instead of a choice. This meant that participants, and their spouses, had to repeatedly assert agency to counter assumptions of infertility or misfortune.

4.3.3 Gendered Expectations and Disproportionate Burden on Women

Sociocultural pressure was also reported to disproportionately effect women, who often used their partner to protect themselves from backlash from family members. This was due to motherhood being viewed as the natural next step of not only marriage, but female identity.

Participant 2 noted, "Especially for women, for men, it's easier. But for you, it's very hard." She also explained how a friend assumed her reproductive intentions, "She assumed, you know, that obviously she would want to have kids. She's a woman, so why not?" Advice was often framed in medicalized or moral terms, "You need to get a birth control. Stop putting these toxins in your body. Like, if you ever want to have kids, this will create such an issue."

In the case of Participant 4, the husband assumed responsibility to reduce scrutiny directed at his wife, "My husband took the responsibility of not wanting a child and that helped. This way, I don't have to listen to the shit people offer on this subject matter."

These accounts highlight that it is often difficult for women to have an identity outside of being a mother and that this is looked at as the ultimate step to take as a woman. The responsibility of having children falls on women, along with any social accountability that may come with their reproductive decisions.

4.3.4 Social Navigation, Avoidance, and Emotional Labor

May participants tried to avoid scrutiny by changing their social behavior, such as withdrawing from extended family gatherings, "Initially I used to avoid spending too much time with extended family and social circles because they would almost always ask about children or try to give a lecture on the benefits", as stated by Participant 6. She described performing socially expected reactions despite not understanding the emotional attachment completely, "I still don't understand what happiness people feel on this news… however, I can effectively fake it for the parents." Participant 5 shared that some friendships shifted subtly, "My friends with kids would rather not meet me because whatever."

At the same time, participants observed ironic reversals in peer narratives, "People who were telling me to have kids, when they had kids, they are now telling me to not have kids…she recently had her baby… and she told me that, please never have kids because it's so hard. And it's really tiring. And it's so, so stressful", as shared by Participant 2.

These accounts illustrate that there was a lot of emotional labor involved, particularly for the women, to maintain social harmony, whether with family or friends, and keep their choices private to avoid conflict or disagreement.

4.3.5 Anticipated Social Distance and Life-Course Divergence

Participants also expected a natural falling-out with their friends as most transition into parenthood. Participant 7 reflected:

Most of our friends have kids and we do have discussion around this topic as to when all of them would have kids and we wouldn't it might be hard for them to relate to us and vice versa. But that's a problem for another day.

This reflection shows that even if there is no direct conflict between the participants, their spouses, and their friends, there is an expectation of social rhythms restructuring as priorities change for all over time.

Theme 3 elucidates that problems associated with being childfree don't stem from the relationship between the couple but how they are viewed social. Participants that had stable, healthy marriages, reported still feeling judged, morally questioned, and scrutinized over their decision. This made the decision of remaining childfree not just a personal choice, but a matter that was contested publicly and a part of their social identity. Boundary-setting, assertive communication, emotional regulation, strategic reframing, and, at times, selective withdrawal, were essential in ensuring that their relationship was protected from external influences.

It is important to note that that the ability to withstand these social pressures reflects resilience and the strength of the relationship. Being on the same page about remaining childfree allowed participants to buffer out external intrusion.

5. LIMITATIONS

Pakistan, being a de facto pronatalist society, is a country where women have to face divorce, character judgement, and religious pressure, if they are childless, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Due to this harsh reality, the subject of voluntary childlessness becomes even more sensitive, making women not want to discuss it at all. In the case of voluntary childlessness, they have to face character assassination and their decision is considered a grave

"sin", which brings further pressure from not just the society, but family members as well. Hence, conducting research on such a sensitive topic proved difficult as few women were willing to openly discuss their experiences and decisions, which contributed to the limited sample size of the study, effecting the generalizability of the findings.

There is also a clear deficiency in Pakistani literature about voluntary childlessness, as this is often just summed up with infertility. Not only are these concepts vastly different, but the lived experiences are nowhere similar. Treating voluntary and involuntary childlessness as one only muddles the data and makes analysis and comparison of research findings within the local context much tougher. For a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of voluntary childlessness and its relation to marital adjustment, further research is needed.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study provides an insight into the lived experiences and marital adjustment of voluntarily child-free married women in Pakistan. This study presents a new viewpoint to the pronatalist ideology. From the results of this study, it can be concluded that marital adjustment and satisfaction are not affected by being child-free. On the contrary, if the decision is mutual, open, and value-based, the marital adjustment is enhanced.

All the participants viewed their decision as an intentionally taken one, mutually agreed on, and influenced by context. Some participants had career and financial aspirations they wanted to pursue, while others did not want to jeopardize the intimacy they shared with their husbands. However, some participants expressed that they might reconsider their decision should there be any changes in the future. Their satisfaction was based on relational qualities and not parenting.

Moreover, the participants experienced considerable societal pressure and stigma. They often sought refuge in their husbands acting as barriers against the family members' opinions. These constraints were mostly socio-cultural in nature and not relational, with the majority of them being women. Despite this, they expressed high marital satisfaction because of their caring spouses.

Generally, this research stresses the significance of making a distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness since these individuals in society have different perspectives altogether. It also highlights a need for deeper evaluation of the idea of fulfillment in a marital setup, which is often linked to parenthood.

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