

## Education In-between Men's Antagonism and Women's Protagonism

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### Abstract

This study argues about Pukhtun women's protagonist and men's antagonist approaches towards women's status and higher education opportunities in the Pukhtun society of Pakistan. My sample women perceived higher education as a necessary and empowering element for women's transformation into a just Pukhtun society. They, however, faced antagonism from their family men for their higher education opportunities. They articulated helplessness regarding their subjects' choices at the graduate level, ultimately dropping them from professional degrees at the post-graduate level. There was no frustration among the sample women regarding family interference in their future lives. However, the sample women showed dissatisfaction with the prevailing education standards in the province and demanded that women be educated in women-only education settings because co-education revealed a major barrier to the Pukhtuns' antagonism.

Keywords: women, Pukhtunkhwa, higher education, Pukhtuns, male domination

### Introduction

The inhabitants of Pukhtunkhwa are Pukhtuns, also referred to as 'Afghans' or 'Pathans' by Western historians (Caroe, 1957). They speak Pashtu/Pukhtu and are traditional people who adhere to their centuries-old customs and traditions. Known for their refusal to accept any domination by foreign rulers, this might be one reason why British imperialists intervened very little in Pukhtunkhwa, maintaining it as 'a land without law' until 1901 (Rittenberg, 1988). Similarly, education, a crucial power of the domain for them, arrived late in Pukhtunkhwa, emerging only in the early 1900s. As a result, women's socio-political awareness lagged behind that of other provinces in Pakistan. Western education spread among the people many years after the British conquest. Like elsewhere in the region, the first educational initiatives were introduced by Christian missionaries; however, Western education had little immediate impact in Pukhtunkhwa, and the status of women did not significantly improve with the society's exposure to modernity (Khattak & Hussain, 2018).

This study focuses on a group of relatively young women from Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (Pakistan), formerly known as the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), Pukhtun women students from this region. While my initial interest in this group began

with female education in general and women's roles in Pakistan's historic freedom struggle and the formation of the Pakistani state, it has expanded to a more nuanced understanding of education. This study investigates Pukhtun women's perceptions of their educational experiences, which are often overlooked in research studies focusing on women and education in Pakistan.

In Pukhtunkhwa, 'home' is defined as a woman's legitimate ideological and physical space (Shah, 1998). Shah further highlights famous proverbs among the Pukhtuns for a woman, that there are two places for her to live: in her home or her grave. She has limited or no access to the outside affairs of society because, culturally, it is the duty of men to be responsible for all outside social and political affairs. This ideological demarcation between public and private, inside and outside worlds, intensified and maintained the notion of honour and the institution of *pardah* (Shah, 1998). This area of Pakistan is stricter than others regarding women's honour and *pardah* (veiling and segregation).

Thus, this study develops a framework to examine the sample women's choices for subject combinations for BA/BSc degrees, family response towards women's higher education, because the preference for men's education is prevailing in Pukhtunkhwa society. Furthermore, the researcher problematised the status of working women in society because a woman's future is in the hands of their family men. The family men decided and planned for the woman's career, education, and who she would marry. Unfortunately, this entire scenario is being painted by religious misinterpretation that a woman must get married as soon as she reaches puberty, and according to their family's will.

## Methodology

A semi-structured interview tool was utilised to collect data from a sample of 40 women from four colleges in Pukhtunkhwa. The women were randomly selected from final-year BA/BSc students. Their socio-economic status was assessed based on their father's monthly income, resulting in the classification of the four colleges into upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, and working-class economic classes.

## Relevant literature

Pukhtun men are the owners of their women, and as heads of the household, they expect respect and obedience from their family, especially from women. A woman's legal position is also very weak in Pukhtunkhwa society. She is always deprived of her property rights because of the misinterpretation of religious terms, where she is the owner of half a share of her father's and one-third share of her husband's properties. This leaves women dependent on men. Typically, the only livelihood is marriage, so after her father and brother, she would be protected by her husband and then her son.

This culture gives men the role of the protector and provider for the family, and it is believed that there is no need to educate women to be part of the workforce unless the family circumstances make this a necessity. This is because the Pukhtun do not like working women. Women's work is seen as a disgrace to the family honour, as well as the impression that the family men are not capable of earning good money for their women. Therefore, men's education is considered more important, and if a woman is educated, she would naturally want to work outside the home, bringing shame to the entire family.

Women with professional careers are lacking in Pakistan. We need role models to challenge the existing male knowledge paradigms that permeate Pakistani society; women should be given equal representation in this process (Renold, 2004). However, women must change their mindset, first to engage in all academic professions because religion does not restrict them, and second, for society to run smoothly, women must work alongside their male counterparts. Malik and Courtney (2011) argued that increasing women's access to higher education empowers them to serve as role models within their families and communities. They also explored how higher education is an empowering tool that liberates women from various traditional and cultural obstacles in Pakistan.

Furthermore, Naz et al. (2012, p. 83) found that women are impeded from advancing at every step during their domestic life, professional engagements, and educational careers. The social structure of Pukhtunkhwa manifests the hold of centuries-old customs, traditions, and norms that block women's educational advancement and encourage them to adopt caregiving roles.

## Data analysis and discussion

The sample women's responses and transcriptions of the interviews can be classified into the following themes for contextual analysis of women's perceptions and experiences.

### *Perceptions and experiences of their BA/BSc subjects combination*

The upper-class sample women were studying in a renowned college of Pukhtunkhwa with subject combinations (Zoology and Botany or Maths and Statistics, etc.). Those subjects were not their first option because they wanted to join the medical colleges, but they earned only a higher merit or below in their entry aptitude test, so they were left with only one option: to enrol in BA/BSc courses. Similarly, the middle-class and working-class sample women had less interest in their degree; some of their subjects were not available in their colleges, but their parents' financial burden and the hassle of arranging public transport for them compelled them to enrol locally. Notable responses were:

*I had a desire to join a medical college, but alas! I could not qualify, so my only choice left for me to do any kind of BSc degree now. (upper-class)*

*I like my college and my subjects' combination; I am happy with them now, although these were not my first choices. My second option was Pharmacy, but my parents did not allow me to do that. . . they said I would work with men. (upper-middle-class)*

*I have chosen my subjects, as the college did not offer the subjects that I wanted to study, but I live locally, so I preferred this college. Other colleges are too far from my house. (lower-middle-class)*

*With the help of my parents and siblings, I finalised my subject combination because I do not want to fail in the final year of my BA. (working-class)*

There were feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction in the sample women's responses of upper-class, lower-middle, and working-class for their BSc degree, while the upper-middle BA students were enjoying their studies:

*I do not know why our parents and society put in our minds that the only profession in which a woman can stand out in her family is medicine. Because I dreamed about having that career, it is hard for me now to adjust to these new subjects. (upper-class)*

*I do not like these subjects, but I can't do anything, as I have to at least finish my degree. I am happy with my college and subjects because it was my choice, and my parents supported me. (upper-middle-class)*

Thus, most of the sample women were continuing with their degree, whether they liked it or not.

Under rigid Pukhtun perspectives, subjects such as mathematics, statistics, and the natural sciences were traditionally taught to men, while art, literature, and the biological sciences were traditionally taught to women. This seems to be underpinned by the prevailing cultural and religious views because these professional subjects will take longer to study. Women are encouraged to study for only short periods for their first degree so that they can get married at an early age. Pukhtunkhwa parents' priority is to find a suitable marriage proposal rather than a suitable subject choice for their daughters' higher education. Similar concerns were noted in works of twentieth-century feminist writers, who commented on parents' apparent lack of interest in careers for girls, as they assumed that they would simply marry, have children, and stay at home (Blackstone & Fulton, 1975; Hussain, 1995).

### *Perceptions and experiences regarding their family's response to higher education*

30% of the sample women specified that their family men would encourage them to obtain a higher education, while 10% were facing confrontation from the male members of their family. Interestingly, the brothers and the cousin brothers and uncles of the sample women from extended families were more in opposition to their sisters and nieces receiving higher education than their fathers:

*All of my family members are interested in me pursuing a higher education. I saw mixed reactions in my family men towards women's higher education, so I would say it varies from person to person. One of my cousins' sisters was forced to get married after her BA because of a good marriage proposal from a family, but her husband allowed her to continue higher education after marriage. (upper-class)*

*My parents encouraged me to study for my MSc because a BSc is not a good qualification to have a good marriage proposal. (upper-middle-class)*

*My father and uncles are broad-minded and will allow me to pursue higher education, but my mother, brothers, and cousins (brothers) are reluctant. I heard them saying to my father and uncles that girls should not be highly*

*educated because then it would be hard to find a suitable proposal for them within the family. (lower-middle-class)*

*My family men love women to be educated and independent, but the family resources are scarce. Therefore, we might go for distance education. University education is very expensive, and my family will not allow me to study in a co-education setting. (working-class)*

Women of Pukhtunkhwa do not have control over their own lives because the family, culture, and society push them towards taking on the roles of wives and mothers. In this traditional society, a degree is a piece of paper that does not guarantee a successful marital life. A highly educated woman has difficulty finding an educated, suitable match for marriage. Males prefer to marry young, uneducated women because of their flexible and non-argumentative attitude and their ability to bear more children, all of which are characteristics that will enable a man to easily dominate them (Ahmed, 2022).

### *Perception and experiences regarding a professional career*

The sample women were in favour of a segregated work environment, like their family counterparts, but the men were more in favour of a career in teaching and medicine only. As mentioned earlier, these professions are considered respectable; however, the medical colleges' aptitude entry test is very competitive in Pakistan, so very few people can join this profession. Consequently, most of the women in Pukhtunkhwa are engaged in the teaching profession because of its easy access and low standards:

*My family women are doctors and college principals—now the new generation is involved in IT professions, but are discouraged due to mixed-gender work environments. (upper-class)*

*It all depends on my MSc grades and working environment. Then, my family will decide what is best for me. I live in an extended family; therefore, I must ask all my family men (uncles and cousins, etc.). They might have no objection, but we are strict in purdah observance. (upper-middle-class)*

*I don't know . . . We do not have a tradition of women working in my family. My father and brothers will not allow me to work. My brothers will kill me if I ask them (the subject appeared to be scared). But to be very honest, I do not know now. (lower-middle-class)*

*I think my family will allow me; they would be willing to some extent... We have a traditional family pattern; we do not encourage women to work. I saw my family women always cooking, washing, and serving men. However, now my parents need my financial help to collect a good dowry for my marriage. (working-class)*

Upper and working-class sample women were more willing towards women's careers and well-being. However, their approaches were different from each other. A career for the upper class was a status symbol, while for the working class, it was financial assistance. Upper-middle and lower-middle sample women were reluctant and confused about whether to share their family men's approach towards women in a professional career, or whether they were unsure about the unpredictable nature of the

Pukhtun men. Likewise, Louise and Val (2017) and Chisholm and Woodward (2012) confirmed that women graduates are often confused about whether to choose between marriage, bearing children, and part-time post-graduate work, or entering high-status, traditionally ‘masculine’ jobs; they have been highly pressured by society either way. Such women are barely accepted by society, and they do not attract men. In Pukhtunkhwa, professional women are discouraged, and raising a family is considered the only purpose of a woman’s life in Pukhtunkhwa.

### *Perception and experiences of marriage and higher education*

The sample women were indecisive regarding their plans because they had never had an experience of deciding or doing anything on their own. Their families have had a great contribution in deciding their future regarding their education, career, and marriage. About 35% of the sample women wanted to teach, followed by 25% who wanted a good career, but were not sure about the field of study and work, while 11% wanted to get married and enjoy their family life. Some responses were:

*To be very honest, I just want to get married to a rich person, sit at home, have lovely children, and enjoy my life because at the end of the day, I am a woman, and I have to do all this.* (upper-class)

*I want to join a textile designing company; I would love to be a textile designer and have my own designer clothes and materials. However, there are very limited opportunities for women in Pukhtunkhwa.* (upper-middle-class)

*It would be interesting in the teaching profession. It has less tension, more holidays, and a relaxing, segregated, women-only environment.* (lower-middle-class)

*I don’t know . . . I am living in the present and have never thought about my future . . . my future is always very scary, so wherever Allah takes me, I will be happy.* (working-class)

Education at the primary and secondary levels promotes a passive role for women, sometimes giving them puzzling and ambiguous messages about the stereotypical role in society. Therefore, there is a drastic need to study higher education and hold it to the same criteria. The classic study of Komarovskiy (1946) found that women in higher education had the same conflicting experience with their caregiving and career roles; that societal expectation is that women will take on a passive role and learn to be ‘feminine’ and marriageable. Similarly, Pukhtunkhwa society gives its women the impression that, despite their cleverness, their main responsibility is to serve their families. She is not allowed to take part in the decision-making process, such as budgeting, because a wife does not know her family’s or husband’s income.

### *Perceptions and experiences of women-only universities*

Women’s universities across the country, but particularly in Pukhtunkhwa, are in strong demand due to the Pukhtuns’ strict observance of the *pardah* tradition. There was a willingness among women of all economic statuses for women-only universities:

*Yes! There should be women's universities in our province, as most women discontinue their education after their BA/BSc because of co-education, we strongly recommend separate universities. (upper-class)*

*I think our society is very conservative regarding co-education, because we cannot change people's mentality, then why not set up separate women's universities as an alternative solution? Because we cannot fight against patriarchy, there should be a way out. (upper-middle-class)*

*Our country is poor, and we always have a lack of resources for education because most of our GDP goes to our defence budget, so with such limited resources, how would it be possible? However, now, the government should upgrade the existing colleges to post-graduate to offer at least MA/MSc degrees, but I am in favour of separate women's institutes. (lower-middle-class)*

*I am not only in favour of women-only universities but also free tuition or scholarships for women, too, because lifelong higher education is a long-term investment. (working-class)*

Thus, the sample women were pragmatic in their answers and wanted a platform for women at separate women's universities to access higher education. Their educational and societal observations and experiences made them more sympathetic towards their fellow women to think selflessly. They expressed no confidence in unisex educational environments. It is interesting to observe that the sample women of all economic strata were keen on their higher education. Despite limited opportunities for women's work and education, their enthusiasm was a positive sign of encouragement. Most of the universities are in urban areas of the province, so women in rural areas are deprived of higher education. Distance from educational institutes is one of the key barriers to higher education.

## Conclusion

*The superiority of one sex is based exclusively on the inferiority and weakness of the other. (Belotti, as cited in Thomas, 1990, p. 11)*

Cultural traditions, patriarchy, and male domination are important aspects of gender in a Pukhtunkhwa society that require comprehensive study to be understood because these are the common causes of women's subordination. The study explored how women are excluded from education and holding positions of power in Pukhtunkhwa society. The society under study is male-dominated, and women have limited access to public life.

The honour of the family is linked to a woman's sexuality, and that encourages her role as a housewife. Women are marginalised in education and the workplace due to a segregated society and the 'over-strict' practice of *purdah* culture in Pukhtunkhwa society. Therefore, co-education is discouraged at all levels of education in Pukhtun society. The lack of female role models in Pukhtun society plays a key role in blocking women from attaining a higher education and career. Women do not see any women in society who combine being a good wife with an education and a career. Women generally must sacrifice one role, which is usually education or career.

Separate women's institutes and universities are in popular demand by women in Pakistan. Although a few women's universities and women's study centres have been established by the government, opening more institutions would allow access to higher education for women who are reluctant to go to co-educational universities. However, it is unlikely that existing sexually integrated colleges and universities will eliminate co-education to promote women's education or to avoid the difficulties it generates. Nevertheless, these doubts have stimulated thinking, particularly in re-evaluating the content of the education to which women have gained access. This might be one of the factors that account for the low percentage of women participants in higher education.

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