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**FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FEMALE MARGINALIZATION IN  
PAKISTANI HOUSEHOLDS: GENDERED PROBLEMS  
ENCOUNTERED BY WOMEN FROM PAKISTANI DIASPORA IN  
CANADA**

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**Abstract**

The present study aimed to explore the factors contributing to female marginalization in Pakistani households. Opinions and views of lived experiences of women from the Pakistani diaspora in Canada were gathered to analyze if their situation is any different from that of women residing in Pakistan and from the international migration theory suggested by Boyd and Grieco in 2003. Qualitative research using the phenomenological approach was used to investigate the lived experiences of eight Pakistani women from the most densely populated Pakistani neighborhoods across Canada. The study focused on elite urban women who were university educated or were enrolled in a university degree program. Thematic analysis has been used to analyze the data. Through data analysis on problems encountered, eight associated categories emerged: threatening jokes, demeaning remarks, negative comparisons, expressions of opinion, marital expectations, struggle for education, female child trauma and patriarchy. The study conducted is at the intersection of gender, migration, and racialization. Women from the Pakistani diaspora in Canada experience structural barriers that limit social participation, economic mobility, and mental well-being. Addressing these inequities requires policy frameworks that integrate mental health and social development supports, flexible labor market access, equitable representation, and empowerment-oriented education focused on rights and opportunities in Canada.

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**Keywords:**

*Pakistani diaspora, mental health, South Asian women, female migration, patriarchy, domestic violence, intimate partner violence*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, women from developing countries continue to face underprivileged conditions and struggle for basic rights and social recognition (Ansari, Ahmed, & Nayab, 2023). Pakistani women are specifically marginalized in their society based on gender, religion, and profession (Ansari, et al., 2023). Pakistani migrant women face similar challenges in education, employment, language, dress code, community, and identity due to constant pressure from their families, and they remain marginalized as compared to the men from their diaspora (Malik, 2022). Marginalization is defined as “process through which persons are peripheralized (in sociocultural context) based on identities, associations, experiences and environment”. (Hall et al., 1994).

Pakistani diaspora is often put under the realm of South Asia and its own challenges and struggles are overlooked (Jamil, 2024). Pakistani women are more open to the idea of relocation to Canada as an immigrant as compared to women from other low-income and middle-income countries because it relatively gives them more freedom to live independently, make their own choices and to be hopeful about gender equality in their next generation (Jibeen, & Hynie, 2012). Pakistani women immigrants in Canada face multiple resettlement challenges and their issues often remain undisclosed in their cultural communities (Khan, & Watson, 2006). For these reasons, it has been asserted that in general, women from Pakistani diaspora face more acculturative stress than any other South Asian community (Jamil, 2024).

It is important to understand international migration in order to have a reasonable understanding about the gender specific migration experiences (Boyd, & Grieco, 2003). The process of immigration and the false hopes of a better life give immigrant women in many nations, communities, and diasporas more mental trauma and they often report feeling split between two identities (Khan, & Watson, 2006). Migration may lead to change of location and social status of women to some extent, but their relative status in family hierarchies stays the same (Boyd, & Grieco, 2003).

In 2003, the study conducted by Boyd and Grieco incorporated gender to explain international migration theory because traditional studies discussed the causes of migration but not the migration experience. The study discussed in this paper builds on this previous work, examining recent migration experiences, bringing to light significant gendered challenges and issues experienced by Pakistani women when they migrate to Canada. The sample of participants includes university-educated

professional women born and raised in urban centers of Pakistan who have migrated to Canada in last 5 to 10 years. The reason for selecting these women from Pakistani diaspora in Canada was these women are educated, have some exposure to the world and know the challenges of their cultural restrictions and modern-day needs. They migrate to Canada for a better future, one that they anticipate will include socio-economic empowerment and independence and yet, their cultural and social contexts put them in situations where they have to make choices that put their families and the opinions and familial direction of their elders first. Both this socio-economic group of Pakistani women and this phenomenon in Pakistani diasporic communities requires both acknowledgement and deeper analysis in migration and diasporic scholarship and communities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **South Asian diaspora and female migration experiences**

The South Asian population is the largest immigrant community in Canada (Islam, Khanlou, & Tamim, 2014). Yet, despite the well-documented socio-political, emotional and cultural struggles associated with transnational migration, there is little to no scientific information and data on South Asian Canadians' mental health status and well-being (Islam, Khanlou, & Tamim, 2014). Most reports, especially those from South Asia, reflect migration issues from a male perspective, often overlooking women's experiences entirely (Malik, 2022). One of the few studies available—a qualitative study on women from the Greater Toronto Area in Toronto, a large city in a central Canadian province—reveals that Pakistani immigrant women go through four stages of immigrant experience. These stages include (1) seeking a better future, (2) confronting reality, (3) grieving and mourning, and (4) gains, remains, and coping (Khan & Watson, 2006).

A similar qualitative study on Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants in the UK reveals that UK-born Pakistani and Bangladeshi men prefer marrying spouses from their country of origin as it fits their gendered ideas of role playing after marriage, and they often enable men to retain the subordinate status of their female spouse (Dale, 2008).

Due to the complex interplay of migration, radicalized modern minority discourses and gendered ideologies, single South Asian moms are more challenged than other women in their communities due to deep rooted patriarchy (Banerjee, Chacko, & Piya, 2020).

### **Pakistani women in Canada and migration experiences**

A study on Pakistani women immigrants living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) reveals that acculturative stress significantly contributes to the mental health of women immigrants as a risk and as a protective factor (Jibeen, & Khalid, 2010). In another study, Pakistani immigrant women reported that they feel mentally and physically exhausted, overwhelmingly frustrated with financial dependence imposed by their families and socially isolated due to restrictions limiting them to family-only socializing (Nichols, Etemandi, & Tyyskä, 2017). Jibeen and Khalid (2010) also found that acculturative stress undermines psychological well-being and is associated with increased anxiety, depression, and insomnia.

Due to socio-cultural and religious restraints, new Pakistani immigrant adolescents struggle with physical, emotional, and self-identity issues and developing sexuality due to a lack of sexual and reproductive health knowledge (Punjani et al., 2022). A study of Pakistani women managing households within “astronaut families”—where one family member works abroad to financially support relatives residing in Canada—highlights the isolation these women experience and the extensive responsibilities they bear in maintaining family cohesion. (Farooqui, 2015). She is constantly responsible for keeping up with the demands of her in-laws, children, household responsibilities while ignoring her own mental and physical health struggles of not having her spouse with her and continuing with the burden of the repetitive cycles of family reunions and separations (Farooqui, 2015).

Pakistani immigrant women, across both earlier and more recent waves of migration, struggle to integrate into established Canadian social norms and practices, remain disadvantaged in the labour market, and experience cultural disorientation within their households and surrounding communities (Ameeriar, 2017). Due to family and cultural pressures, Pakistani immigrant women have reported time poverty, invisibility in family hierarchies, subordination to their husbands, and feelings of dissatisfaction at varying levels (Nichols, et al., 2017).

### **Matriarchy/Neopatriarchy**

A matriarch or a patriarch is defined as an older man or women in a family or society that holds power over its people (Banerjee, 2015). South Asian women have been shown to have internalized patriarchy, with elder women controlling younger women by inflicting strong patriarchal beliefs, a phenomenon

Habiba, Ali & Ashfaq (2016) term neopatriarchy. While neopatriarchy is indeed a concept that may well undergird phenomena explored in this study, the term matriarchy was found to be a better conceptual framework for the analysis that follows. A specialized Pakistani/South Asian understanding of matriarchy is well suited to the gendered power structures this study examines.

Historically, there have been some matrilineal societies in the world, and some studies suggest that matriarchy may have existed before patriarchy. Such historical references are largely used for rhetorical or political purposes (Bakker, 2018). More important to the analysis here, the definition of matriarchy given by European theorists—i.e. a social, cultural (including religious), economic and political structures organized around women and/or female power and empowerment—may not be same for all cultures and societies (Banerjee, 2015). Within South Asian socio-cultural contexts, Banerjee (2015) conceptualizes matriarchy as a social system in which women occupy central positions in family and social organization, particularly through their control over lineage, property, and household responsibilities. Rather than framing matriarchy as the political domination of women over men, Banerjee emphasizes it as a gendered social arrangement that challenges conventional patriarchal definitions of power. Similarly, patriarchy is defined as a social system in which men have greater access to power and resources than women, and in which some men dominate other men along with women through hierarchical relations (Wiesner-Hanks, 2018). Before discussing this point in more detail, it is important to note that definitions of patriarchy and enactment of patriarchal norms appear relatively consistent across cultures. Which is to say, patriarchy quite consistently describes social, cultural (including religious), economic and political structures organized around men or male power and empowerment. Globally, patriarchal societies have been shown to privilege male leadership, needs, and concerns, and include gendered structures that facilitate this privilege in and outside of familial/domestic spheres. Under patriarchy, women's roles are often confined to the domestic or familial spheres and/or subservient to men or male members of households and communities. In a previous study on marginalization of educated women in Pakistan, patriarchal marginalization was linked to anxiety, obsessive-compulsive, and somatization symptoms, whereas traditional marginalization was associated with depressive symptoms in victims (Khan, 2025).

A study revealed that in Eastern societies, the elderly women of the family inflict the patriarchal norms and practices on the younger women in order to keep their influence in family hierarchy (Akram & Khan, 2021), a phenomenon we might term neopatriarchal (Habiba, Ali & Ashfaq, 2016). In many

South Asian communities, however, a particularly matriarchal cultural responsibility for ‘social continuity’ gets assigned to women in many households. Such power is expected to be enacted by women, particularly the older women in a given household, even as male dominance prevails as a final decision-making power for all in personal and extended family matters (Mohta, 2025). Unlike modern-day Europe, the context and understanding of matriarchy in historical Europe had been much similar to the present prevalence and enactment of matriarchy in Asian societies (Szoltysek et al., 2025). Colonialism inflicted by the Europeans disrupted the matriarchal structures of indigenous communities by bringing patriarchal norms and eliminating female influence (Desmarais, 2025). Mohanty 1988 conceptualizes colonization as a system of structural domination that suppresses social heterogeneity, often through violence. She argues that colonial power extended beyond the seizure of land and resources to the reconfiguration of social relations, particularly through the devaluation of women’s work, which reshaped gender roles within Indigenous societies and contributed to women’s marginalization (Mohanty, 1988). However, in present time, modern matriarchal studies call non-patriarchal societies as matriarchal with an attempt to present them as gender-egalitarian and consensus-based society consciously promoting peace and sustainability (Goettner-Aberdroth, 2018).

Amongst immigrant populations, South Asian immigrant women are particularly at higher risk for domestic and intimate partner violence and encounter many difficulties adjusting as new immigrants, while available support services in their new countries are often inaccessible to them at least in part because they are not culturally appropriate (Ahmed & Aulakh, 2023). Due to strict family norms and challenges in finding the right support for women in these circumstances, very little evidence is available on domestic violence cases in South Asian communities living in Canada (Dasgupta, 2000). Immigration brings challenges that increase the stress levels for families, and this leads to an increased risk of domestic violence for women (Aujla, 2013). Marriage migration brings more challenges and threats than opportunities in many cases due to deep-rooted and culturally stringent ideas of masculinity and gender, as well as social marginalization and family relationships (Charsley, & Ersanilli, 2018). The sparse literature on the subject currently suggests that 4 out of 10 South Asian women in North America are victims of intimate partner violence (Madden et al., 2016). In addition, more than half of the South Asian women that do marriage migration to Canada are financially restricted and dependent on their spouses which puts them at an increased risk of partner violence (Ahmed & Aulakh, 2023).

## **Current needs of South Asian Women in Canada**

A study on South Asian women undergoing mid-life transition in Canada reveals that these women require better policies and facilities to support their re-employment, social, mental, and personal development, and these supports would facilitate their empowerment and independence (Zou et al., 2023). Another study found that women from the South Asian diaspora need more support from local government and communities to develop resources for their own empowerment (West, & Pilgrim, 1995). Local employment initiatives, women led talks, and mandatory participation can help women to know their rights and possible prospects as a part of Pakistani diaspora communities (West, & Pilgrim, 1995). For newcomer female adolescents in the Pakistani community, there is a need to establish cultural awareness, especially around sexuality, so that they feel socially acceptable and comfortable not just with their own identity but with other ethnicities, cultures, and religions (Punjani et al., 2022).

## **METHOD**

The phenomenological research method was chosen for this research study, since the study focused on exploring the perceptions and opinions from university-educated women belonging to Pakistani diaspora in Canada. Phenomenological research is a type of research methodology which explores individual experiences pertaining to a phenomenon in association with their feelings towards it (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

## **Participants**

The sample of this study is comprised of eight women from Pakistani diaspora in Canada. These participants were aged 18-45 years, held professional university degrees or were enrolled in a university degree program, and had been living in Canada for more than five years. The study was undertaken in one 12-month period by a single researcher and was undertaken as a pilot study to explore whether the problems identified by Boyd and Grieco in 2003 persist, or if elite Pakistani diaspora women feel more supported now than they did more than 20 years ago. It also considered whether these women now experience both freedom and equity in their families and social circles in Canada. Given the single researcher model for this pilot study, the sample size was confined to 3-10, due to the possible saturation of data beyond the stated (and manageable) participant group (Cresswall, 2014). To ensure participant anonymity, the pseudonyms Aneeta, Marina, Noor, Haniya, Rania,

Zeniya, Mahnur, Shaina and Alayah were assigned to them (Guest et al., 2012). Snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants after extensive community engagements amongst Pakistani diaspora across Canada.

Women who were not enrolled in a university degree program or did not have university degree and who had not been a part of Pakistani diaspora for more than five years were excluded. The sample particularly targeted and included university educated, elite and urban women from Pakistan because they have been allowed more freedom and exposure than average Pakistani women living in Pakistan. The women in the sample were allowed to take up co-education at college and university level and they were also allowed to work in their respective fields. All the women stated that their parents faced criticism and challenges from their immediate and extended family members but they supported the decision of their daughters for higher studies for a better and independent future and to break the generational chain of female subjugation in Pakistani households. The women in the sample were permitted by their parents to pursue education and careers; however, most were restricted from further education or career advancement after marriage. These restrictions became more pronounced after migration to Canada, as expectations of primary caregiving roles, limited immigrant resources, and concerns about the perceived westernization of women led husbands and in-laws to discourage or prevent them from pursuing further education or establishing careers.

### **Procedure**

Eight in-depth semi-structured videoconference interviews were conducted on a secure videoconferencing platform with each of the eight participants independently. Ethical considerations were strictly considered. Each interview was conducted as per the convenience and availability of the participants. During the selection of participants, each participant signed a formal consent form through which they were also assured that participant anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. Each participant was made aware of the audio recording and transcription of the interview through the consent forms and they were also briefed over Zoom before the beginning of the interview.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter under discussion, participants were invited to take breaks, skip questions or exit the interview altogether at any time they felt uncomfortable. Predetermined questions from a study-specific interview guide were asked from the participants. Envelope structure was used for the interview questions, meaning that interviews began with general questions to get a

sense of the participants' community positioning and overall experience, then transitioned to specific questions about participants' own gendered experiences and migration issues, if any, then transitioned back to more general questions that asked participants to envision anti-violence supports, practices and/or policies for themselves and their communities. The questions were divided into four categories; the introductory questions related to gender and marginalization in South Asian communities, in-depth questions pertained to personal life experiences, then questions about mental health and gender and lastly, questions about the future. In order to get information rich responses, questions in all four categories were kept open ended.

Each category was carefully structured to keep the sensitivity of the topic in mind and the questions were addressed in a systemic way. The first section allowed room to participants for more in-depth thinking and sharing their experiences. The second section was, of course, the most sensitive as it brought to the surface real life trauma and challenges for the participants. The third section on future outlook and recommendations brought the participants "out of the dark" and shared how they see or would want to see the future for their daughters and girls in their society in coming generations. They also discussed where the changes need to be made the most and what are the most crucial and vulnerable elements of gendered marginalization that need to be changed for the future.

### **Data Analysis**

All the interviews were conducted in English and each one of them was simultaneously transcribed through Zoom. All participants were fluent English speakers since they had studied in English medium schools and colleges and universities where the medium of instruction of English in Pakistan. Thematic analyses were conducted to generate overarching themes from initial pseudonym coding (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Each one of the transcriptions was then analysed thoroughly a second time, including word by word reviews. Three major themes were identified, and seven or eight associated sub-themes, or categories, were identified for each major theme. Per the anti-oppressive methods of this study, participants were given an opportunity to read their interview transcripts after the interviews and revise their responses as needed. This was done to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflect participants' answers to the questions.

Table 1: Gendered Problems Encountered by Women from Pakistani Diaspora in Canada

Theme 1	Associated Categories
Gendered problems encountered	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Threatening jokes</li> <li>2. Demeaning remarks</li> <li>3. Negative Comparison</li> <li>4. Expression of opinion</li> <li>5. Marital Expectations</li> <li>6. Struggle for education</li> <li>7. Female child trauma</li> <li>8. Matriarchy</li> </ol>

**FINDINGS**

This study generated very rich data that has been broken down as follows. The three major themes identified were (1) gendered problems encountered, (2) mental health issues, and (3) coping and motivational factors. Per Table 1, this paper focuses on gendered problems encountered, analyzing findings in the eight associated categories noted. Themes 2 and 3 are discussed in forthcoming papers. Each of the eight associated categories for Theme 1 are key indicators of domestic and mental well-being in these women and relate to socially constructed norms. These categories highlight the most important issues stated by the women from Pakistani diaspora in Canada. According to these women, despite migration, they silently suffer from crucial inequality and subjugation issues within their homes and their immediate social circles.

**Threatening Jokes**

Married women among the participants were particularly affected, experiencing ongoing mental distress as a result of this behavior. Threatening jokes are not like regular healthy jokes between spouses in Pakistani households. They have a subtle meaning hidden in them and they often depict a power dynamic in the couple. Men, their mothers and sisters often use these tactics to reinforce their position in the family which is considered superior to the woman who got married into the family and who is the target in these situations.

It is also important to include here that such tactics are casually used in daily lives to indirectly assert power without any solid basis for argument. Unlike a healthy couple relationship where spouses can share personal jokes with each other, the nature of such jokes is debilitating and women are not allowed to say such jokes and comments towards their spouse. This category was important and was discussed thoroughly by the participants. Some of the participants have shared their direct experiences related to threatening jokes and their mental health issues.

For example, Marina said:

*“My husband is nice especially now that our family is complete and I have given birth to a son after two girls in last three years in Canada but his habit of telling me that oh! I can have four wives anytime I would like as my religion allows me constantly makes me bite my nails. My mother-in-law keeps smiling at this and jokes that I should be extremely thankful that my in-laws are so nice and they want to keep only one daughter in law for their elder son”.*

In the response above, the patriarchal power structure is evident and it clearly depicts Marina’s anxiety and the physical reaction to the situation like biting her nails. Here, the husband invokes both religious and patriarchal devaluing of his wife and has a show of power as her lawful husband that is further reinforced by the mother-in-law. Despite the way her husband’s and mother-in-law’s comments demean and devalue her, Marina begins by stating that her husband is a nice man, which further shows how social norms intertwined with misuse of religion still enable her to view him in a positive light even as they put her at the whim of her husband and in-laws.

Alayah mentioned:

*“My ex-husband had mentioned this multiple time in front of his friends that no matter how independent and career-oriented women our wives think they are, they should always be reminded that we can give them divorce any second by just saying the word divorce thrice, as per Islamic tradition. Therefore, they should always be on their toes for us and thankful that we sponsored them to be in Canada and they are able to live this independent and career driven life”.*

Here, two powerful structures, Islamic ideology and Canadian immigration policy, are being put to use by the perpetrator to threaten and undermine Alayah’s career and any associated real or perceived independence from her husband and domestic life, and to make her realise her non-comparative position and power in the family and in the social hierarchical structure.

## **Demeaning Remarks**

Women reported that degrading behaviour and reminding women of their position as subordinate to men at home and in society offended them. These women felt offended because they are educated, empowered and well aware of the world outside. Due to strict socio-cultural norms, they remain silent on discriminatory behaviours towards them as it helps to keep the peace of their homes. These women are also aware that Islam teaches love, harmony and equal rights between a man and wife but they endure unequal behaviors by their spouses and in-laws due to extremely powerful social structures. It is important to note that these women felt offended because most of the time they are unable to comprehend that where are they making a mistake in their daily lives. They tend to follow the teachings of Islam, raise families according to the standards set by society and yet, they are treated inferior to the male members around them to keep them under the strict control of patriarchy.

Haniyah mentioned:

*“Despite being raised in a family full of love and care for me, growing up I have witnessed how my mother and aunts were constantly treated as lesser creatures than men in the family. Not only that, my mother constantly faced humiliating remarks about being a fatherless child raised amongst four other sisters by a financially dependent mother. My mother listened to all the remarks quietly since she also believed that she is weak because she has no father and she has to be nice to make sure her sisters get married in good households”.*

In the response stated above, the role of power play by the husband is evident as he does provide financial support, a family and shelter for his wife but at the same time he also continues to remind his wife of how unfortunate she has been and how she should be obliged to her husband for providing her safety and a respectable status in society.

Female subjugation is intergenerational and passed down via example and direct social training to women from their mothers and grandmothers before it is inflicted upon them by their husbands and in-laws. Young girls grow up learning to remain silent in the face of gendered subjugation, and witnessing their mothers, aunts and other female family members listen to humiliating remarks and demeaning comments about themselves and their actions by the men in the family. Therefore, at very young age, young girls start learning to internalize their views and frustration on inequitable behaviors.

Zeniya stated that:

*“I could not conceive for some time and all I heard through the corridors of the house were the talks between family members about me not being a complete woman. Later, when I conceived and gave birth to my girls, my mother-in-law and her sisters complained that this is the best she could do. She is not the chosen one to carry a boy in her womb and it is only our prayers that worked for her and she could bear these girls at least”.*

In the response above, a woman is demeaned by other women and she is not considered equal to the women in the family, let alone the male members of the family because she failed to produce a male child. Anything that is deviating from the strict social standards of society lowers the bar for equality for women. In this case, the inability to produce a male child led to Zeniya’s weak position in the family of which is she constantly reminded by demeaning remarks.

Shaina stated that:

*“I never knew I am so average looking until I got married and moved to Canada. I have no family or friends here and my husband’s whole family lives here. His female cousins used to make fun of me that I am plain looking and how I do not match with his Canadian persona. They even once said how he got into the arranged marriage talks and married me as he was very picky about his cars and that his Tesla deserves a better passenger princess than I am as his partner”.*

Here, the respondent reports feeling less valued and insecure due to constant reminders and demeaning remarks about her physical appearance. The cousins of the husband want to exert at least part of their control over her as a new sister-in-law in the family by making demeaning remarks about her appearance.

### **Negative Comparison**

One of the most encountered problems by the participants was negative comparison. Their families, in-laws and/or spouses compared them to others, and found the women lacking. Participants reported that comparisons between people from the same generation was quite common in Pakistani households. For example, participants were compared to cousins and sisters-in-law, or their husbands compared them to the wives of their friends and cousins, and/or their mothers-in-law compared them to the daughters-in-law of their other sons. All participants found these negative comparisons to be extremely harmful for their mental health and well-being. Such comparisons both exert hierarchical

power in the family system and keep the women in the family in constant guilt and doubt about themselves by comparing them to unrealistic ideals that do not align with their homes and lifestyle needs.

Marina mentioned that:

*“I am so exhausted with three kids under the age of five all the time and yet I am trying to cook, clean and manage the guests to the best of my ability. Yet, almost every evening my mother-in-law would sit in the living room after my husband comes back from work and casually mentions some woman of my age in her family and tells my husband how perfect she is and how she is managing the household better than us. She even mentioned once how our house looks old and depressing because I manage it in a depressing way and it is not fun like her sister’s daughter-in-law’s house”.*

Another classic example from everyday life of a young Pakistani women trying her best to please the husband and the in-laws. Comparing a daughter-in-law and/or a wife to someone in family especially sisters-in-law creates constant doubt and pressure on the daughter-in-law and wife. This tactic keeps the woman in question in control and in this way, the husbands and in-laws are successful in manipulating them for their own benefit.

Noor stated that:

*“I always liked saving up and using my skills to do DIY (do it yourself) home projects. I used to think that my ex-husband would appreciate it and feel good about the fact that I do not demand money from him in a new country like Canada and yet, beautify our home. One day, I showed him a pretty mirror that I made out from some pine cones collected from a hike near to our home and he laughed and called his friend to make me talk to his wife so that she could educate me how to keep up a perfect home like her and not make these cheap looking things”.*

In the example above, the husband tries to pull down the wife by making her feel illiterate about good décor and home sense while comparing her with a friend’s wife. Such demeaning remarks and comparisons damage the women’s egos and self-esteem and make them feel doubtful about themselves. Most women reported that in such cases, after some time they give up on their wishes and gradually start living, behaving and acting according to the will and wish of their husbands and in-laws.

## Denied Opportunities

Participants reported they were seldom given a right in family matters and decision making to express their opinion or give a point of view. In a typical empowered household in these Pakistani families, women are allowed to pursue higher education and a career but when it comes to family matters, they still have no status. In contrast, the males in the household who are their age or younger have the freedom to not only express their opinion but to be key decision makers in most family matters. An empowered woman in these households has her own limitations and she is only allowed to pursue her interests or career goals as long as her interests remain aligned with family values, and so long as she ensures complete transparency in everything she does.

For example, Mahnur reported that:

*“I am a doctor and I was practising in Pakistan before we moved here. My husband comes from a family of doctors but he is a pharmacist. If ever a family health issue comes up or some case is being discussed on the dining table, if I try to give input, my mother-in-law indirectly brings up the fact that she was also a young doctor like me when she got married but she never spoke in any of the medical discussions that took place at her in-laws and she stuck to her traditional roots of being a good daughter-in-law at home and a doctor at work only”.*

In this example above, no matter how educated a woman is as compared to her spouse, she is put down constantly in order to keep the superior status of her husband. Women generally are not looked upon nicely to pitch in their ideas when men of the family are discussing something, especially in cases where the husband is lesser in any way, education level-wise, financially, or any other such metric set by social standards of hierarchy.

Aneeta stated that:

*“I do not have the urge in me to even give or have an opinion in public for anything at all. Although my husband treats me equal to him and listens to me, but even he becomes silent when it comes asking me something in front of his parents. My father-in-law considers it almost criminal in our culture to take an opinion from a woman and he looks down upon his own son for being cordial and all hearing towards his wife”.*

In this example, a man who accepts his wife the way she is and respects her decisions silently still cannot stand up for her or take her on equal footing when in a social setting, especially in front of his

family. This is taken as a sign of weakness in men, and they are not well-respected by their family members. Hence, they only try to show their silent support to their wives when there is no one around and give in to societal norms when in public gatherings and family discussion groups.

### **Marital Expectations**

Another one of the most stated themes was marital expectations. No matter what age, as soon as a woman is married, there are serious and big social and cultural expectations that a woman has to take up as her prime responsibility after marriage.

Alayah reported that:

*“The day you get married in a South Asian culture, no matter what age, you are expected to fulfill each and every role to the fullest. I used to babysit my sister-in-law’s children during the early days of my marriage and move to Canada. I was expected to remember their birthdays and their likes and dislikes, while my husband roamed around like a free bird. I was blamed for not wishing the family members and my in-laws always said that ‘our son/brother is too occupied in his routine and it’s alright if he cannot wish us on time, but it is your duty to remember all family details and show up on events properly’”.*

This response highlights the gendered expectations and difference of treatment towards a newly married man and wife. A newly married wife is suddenly not only responsible for the well-being of her husband but also has a responsibility towards immediate and extended family members of her in-laws. On the contrary, newly married husbands are under no duty or responsibility towards the families of their wives. Furthermore, men are given more leverage after marriage and asked to focus on their careers, outside work and other things important to them as the wife is now there to take care of all family responsibilities towards him and his family.

Rania also stated that:

*“I had never cooked before marriage and I never liked it. But the moment I got married, I got to know that I have to make hot and fresh rotis (flatbread) for every meal. Later, when my husband and I moved to Canada, my mother-in-law would video call me at our dinner time to check and interrogate if I am making fresh rotis or not. She said nothing is more important than her son’s health and I cannot complain about new country or new job since my first responsibility is only the well-being and happiness of her son”.*

Kitchen politics and power play is one the most significant factors that plays a defining role in a Pakistani woman's married life. A mother-in-law holds complete control over such matters while putting all the physical responsibility for the food, health and well-being of all family members on the daughter-in-law. To keep her under control, a daughter-in-law is often reminded of how the mother-in-law had once worked tirelessly for the family, how her kitchen skills are exceptional and how much the daughter-in-law needs to learn from and catch up to her. Such a dynamic not only creates severe mental stress but puts women of the house in a constant competitive state, especially in households that have multiple daughters-in-law. Moreover, in most cases when the husband is reminded by his mother how his wife struggles with work all day and unlike his mom, she is not skillful enough, this can create a rift between the couple, as the husband is encouraged to think that his wife is not worthy of him and his household.

Likewise, Zeniya mentioned:

*"I was in the final year of my masters when my first child was born. I had no friends or family to help me cope with the sleepless nights and the housework, let alone study for my final exams. Once, I asked my husband that he should help me and see how difficult it has all become, and to this his response was a laugh and said, 'women need to learn and manage it all if they want to come at par with men and this is what you signed up for by choosing to study after marriage, too'"*.

The above stated response is another classic example of how women empowerment in Pakistani cultures work. Even if the women are given a chance to build their career alongside their family roles, they are often left alone to deal with it all and manage it at the expense of their physical and mental health.

### **Struggle for education**

Another most stated category in problems encountered was the struggle for education. In most Pakistani households, women have to seek permission and approval from the elders in the family to take up a certain field of education for themselves. This situation is further challenged if a woman wants to pursue studies after her marriage.

Noor stated that:

*"I was barely 18 when I first got married and I had big dreams about life and a heart full of love for my marriage. All I requested my ex-husband was to let me study and focus on my studies for some*

*time. But he created such circumstances that I just could not get enrolled into a degree program. Later, history repeated itself in an even more dramatic way when I remarried and moved to Canada. My second ex-husband also put restrictions on me and kept delaying and dodging the topic of my higher education. I was so let down and I used to think, 'Is it me? Is it something that I am asking for too much?''.*

Marina explained that:

*"I was a top student in all levels of my educational years. But when the proposal came and I told my parents I want to study abroad like my brother, they laughed it off and said good proposals are a blessing and I will be under Allah's wrath if I plan to get astray from the path chosen for a good and modest Muslim woman".*

In both the above stated responses, the primary concern for women in question remains the same: that they are going to choose between the greater and the lesser evil. They are denied education by being constantly reminded their role as wife and a home-maker above all other roles, with no consideration by their spouses or other family members of what they actually want and how they see themselves. Due to such situations, women are put under constant mental pressure and develop self-doubt and anxiety issues.

### **Female child trauma**

Being raised as a girl child is another problem faced by women growing up, and this cultural training can be traumatic, impacting their life into adulthood. In this day and age, where gender discrimination is being outlawed in many parts of the world, South Asian countries still include a cultural framework that understands having and raising girl children as familial burdens. In this sociocultural context, parents are constantly reminded that their daughters are both liabilities and symbolic expressions of their families' honour. Daughters-in-law and wives are constantly under the fear of not bearing a male child, and under threat of divorce or additional wives being brought in by their spouses for this purpose.

Aneeta noted that:

*"We are three sisters and I am the eldest. Our parents were enlightened enough not to long for a male child and they were content with their daughters. However, growing up, I heard all sorts of remarks that were made by relatives towards my mother for not bearing a male child. The moment I turned 18,*

*there was immense pressure on my parents to find a suitable match for me and get me married, and they were told that they should be investing on my wedding rather than higher education. They never discouraged me from doing anything, but these thoughts stuck with me and I kept working harder to prove myself that I am not lesser than any male of my age”.*

Noor stated that:

*“Being one of the five daughters and divorced twice, I have heard relatives at different family gatherings whispering about me and making an example for other younger girls in the family that this is what happens if you do not keep your girls according to societal norms and let them do whatever they want. Girls should know their place as subordinates to men in their family and abide by their fathers, brothers and husbands no matter what. No woman should take any family matter into her own hands; otherwise, they bring disgrace to their families like I did with multiple divorces and now living on my own in Canada.”*

In both responses above, parents have tried their best to empower their daughters. Despite that, the extended family and social circles reinforced the idea of female child being a burden to the family to all these women. Such instances have contributed to self-doubt, lower self-esteem, anxiety and panic disorders amongst women.

### **Matriarchy**

Despite a strong patriarchal hold, matriarchy prevails in many Pakistani homes through elderly women and mothers-in-law. It is very important to understand matriarchy here. Matriarchy as explained in traditional western concepts is very different from what it is in Eastern societies, particularly in South Asian communities. As women grow in family status and jump from one role to another—for example, becoming a mother after becoming a wife and later, becoming a mother-in-law--their position and relative empowerment in family decision making changes. Mothers-in-law are responsible for keeping the daughters-in-law and younger generation under control, and all decisions go through the mothers-in-law. This complex play of power between women of different ages creates stress and vulnerability for younger women, which can in turn causes life-long mental health issues and frustration in younger women.

Haniya mentioned that:

*“More than patriarchy in my family setup, strong and toxic matriarchs have shaped the thought process for me. My mother lacked university education and was financially dependent on my father. They had a good relation, but my paternal grandmother and aunts made sure that they keep my father under their stride and make my mother do things as they seem appropriate only. I have seen my mother sulk and cry in silence. Even when she had her son, she was so shaken that she still felt lesser than my paternal grandmother and aunts in the family hierarchy. It has been years that my grandmother has passed away; my mother is a mother-in-law herself, but still, she is unable to renovate the house or change any system of the house the way she pleases because she believes that she is incapable of doing anything.”*

## **DISCUSSION**

This study investigated factors contributing to female marginalization in Pakistani households by gathering current and former daughters-in-law's opinions and views of their lived experiences as a part of Pakistani diaspora in Canada. As noted above, migration has many social, emotional and cultural implications for Pakistani women, with many hoping it will come with less gendered oppression and marginalization in and outside of their families (Khan, & Watson, 2005). Study findings highlighted several problems encountered by participants as well as the complexities of cultural restrictions, responsibilities and ideas of female subjugation. The findings align with previous similar research on South Asian women, suggesting little has changed over the past two decades.

Pakistani women in this study were open to relocation and immigration to Canada because it gave them the chance of independence, autonomy in decision making, as well as socio-economic and cultural change for their families and coming generations; but they also face many new and added challenges due to migration. Some participants reported having better life satisfaction and personal autonomy in Canada relative to Pakistan, while stating that the factors of autonomy differed in both countries for them (Jibeen, & Hynie, 2012).

Amongst the problems encountered by participants in this study, the most stated problems were: negative comparison, threatening jokes and struggle for education. Most participants stated that they are constantly under the scrutiny of their husbands and mothers-in-law by how they carry out everyday household chores. Women are made to feel less than their mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and other

women in the family, when “perfection” is framed as the ideal when it comes to daily chores. Participants stated that they are indirectly taunted and reminded of how their husbands can have multiple wives to provide them all the comforts, should the participants fail to reach the “perfect” wife standard. Women are constantly under the threat of being left alone or their husbands remarrying, as this remains a running, threatening joke in Pakistani families. Despite promises to let women study and work after marriage, most participants stated that they were denied permission to study after marriage, and they were reminded that their only duty is to serve the family via child bearing and raising the family to the best of social standards. From a marriage perspective, higher education for women is often seen as a negative because such women tend to have modern values and liberal upbringings, which can be a challenging factor for marital adjustments based on socio-cultural norms (Jamil, 2024). Participants also stated that their in-laws like to brag about how they married their sons to a professional and highly educated women but how well she has accepted and adjusted to the rules and customs of their family. Bearing a male child and the constant threat of getting divorced if they fail to produce a male child is also a threat that participants mentioned to make them feel insecure despite being educated and capable of looking after themselves. All women reported that in order to keep up with the social and cultural norms, they endure the unjust demands of their families and make their households look safe and healthy for their kids’ upbringing and respect in the society.

Another highlighting category that the research uncovered was matriarchy. Unlike Western traditional understanding of matriarchy, matriarchal power operates differently in South Asian households. A 2025 study by Mohta also highlights the dynamics of powerplay in the use of matriarchal powers for decision-making by the elderly women in the family. It is an associated category that operates under the realm of patriarchy and as the women get older in their status in the family, they get power and hold on decision-making for younger generations. Mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law exude this power to make decisions for daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law while keeping their sons and brothers or brothers-in-law in control.

## LIMITATIONS

The present study had a small sample size; a bigger sample size can give a more comprehensive view of the situation for women from Pakistani diaspora in Canada. Moreover, the study involved women who hold a university degree or enrolled in a university degree program, financially independent and professionals working in their respective fields. A bigger sample including women with college

diplomas, high school education and stay at home women can provide enriching and unique experiences for strengthening the research. In order to conduct the research, it was very challenging to reach out to women due to the sensitivity of the topic and their reluctance to participate without the consent of their husbands or fathers.

## CONCLUSION

The results show that women in the Pakistani diaspora are well-educated and socially aware of what is happening to them. Due to the deep-rooted socio-cultural factors, traditional and religious restrictions, these women are unable to stand up for themselves. The results highlight multiple problems encountered by these women. These problems lead to life-threatening mental health problems for these women, which not only impact their lives but also the lives of their children and other family members for whom they are responsible. There is a crucial need to act on the severity of these mental health issues.

Pakistani women immigrants also migrate to Canada in hopes of a better and more secure future for themselves. Governments and policy makers need to come up with a plan of action that directly aims at the issues these women face, according to their cultural needs and understanding. These women require policies which enable mandatory social, personal, and mental health development, better and flexible job opportunities, and more community led initiatives that educate about multiculturalism and acceptance in Canada. They need to be educated and informed about their rights and responsibilities as individuals and as equally empowered Canadian citizens. Women from Pakistani diaspora need such informative training even when they come from empowered Pakistani households where they hold an equal position because these women can be helpful resources to women they reach out to in their communities and can provide them a helping hand if needed. Such initiatives will not only help this generation of women, but they will also bring a change for the females in the coming generations of these immigrant families. Lastly, there is a need to develop community-based programs that educate women to help and lift each other up. The barriers of patriarchy need to be abolished, a process that will require education for all generations, with elderly women encouraged to empower and support younger generations of women and girls.

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