

"Alone or on my Own" A Perspective on Marriage from Single Women of Pakistani Media

Abstract: *Singlehood develops a change in family creation recently, which has been a focus of much academic attention. The aim of this study is to explore how Pakistani single media women perceive marriage and singlehood. Around 300 women aged between 20 and 50 from various media organizations such as print and electronic media houses in Pakistan contributed to this research. The outcomes indicated a shift of opinion on the institute of marriage and singlehood. Single women working with media organizations shared modern views on gender roles and marriage. Most of them wanted to get married but at a mature age and condemned the idea of early marriages. They gave preference to higher studies and work for attaining financial stability over marriage. Moreover, the participants had a positive demeanour toward singlehood, however, they were not against the idea of marriage if financial stability, loyalty, care, and supportiveness are there in a future partner.*

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Key Words: Single Media Woman, Gender, Marriage, Pakistan

Introduction

Marriage is considered universal and its role in Pakistani society is incontrovertible for the continuity of generations. In our society, marriage for a woman is considered more respected and singlehood is socially condemned, but the concept of being unmarried has undergone a recent change in family formation which has been a focus of many academic studies (Sultana, 2021).

The single-working women ratio has increased in Pakistan in recent past years. While single women in Pakistani media agencies continue to face many challenges and obstacles in their personal lives though show a lot of potentials (Khan, 2012). They have got financial stability and independence and their status in the house has also improved as they became earning hands (Manzoor, 2015).

Media is a dynamic and demanding industry.

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It requires extraordinary vigilance and 24/7 availability. A news headline might break anytime and anywhere. Under these circumstances, family (and spouse's) cooperation and support become highly essential for married women. Many of the female employees from the media industry complained that they were unable to pay attention to their families. Maintaining a sound work-life balance became one of the biggest challenges for them. Late working hours bring social stigma for single media women as well. Women working with media organizations were frowned upon for staying late at night for work. Moreover, they were also not allowed to travel alone for work purposes. Traditional Pakistani families were less likely to appreciate these demands of the media profession for their daughters. This makes it very difficult to perform better in the workplace for many media women (Uks Research Center on Women and Media, 2009).

Recently, a new concept has emerged pertaining to marriage for single female media personnel. It is influencing the social concept of marriage nationally. (Kislev, 2019). Academic research on singlehood in Pakistan is not mature. However, many studies indicated that more media women are preferring to stay single to pursue their careers (Yusuf, 2018). More academic insights are required for the new idea of singlehood.

Previous studies indicated that in Pakistan like many other South Asian countries, parents were pressurized to arrange their daughters' marriage at young ages to maintain their daughters' honour and chastity, which was feared to decrease at a mature age (Bhatti, 2014). Interestingly, this concept has shifted lately. Singlehood for female professionals (media-related and others) in Pakistan is an emerging phenomenon.

Previously, Pakistan was one of the South Asian countries where most of the women got married between the ages of 20-24 years (Nasrullah, 2014; Raj, 2014). Another study compared the average age of marriage in Pakistan from the 1970s to 2010. It claimed that the marriage age for women was 26 to 27 years (Jones & Yeung, 2014) till 2010. However, a rather modern demographic analysis from the

2017 Census highlighted that the ideal age of marriage recently is not 26 to 27 years old. The study also showed that the rate of unmarried women in Pakistan jumped by 30%. These studies point out that the perception of unmarried women has undergone a substantial change in the last half of the decade. Before that they were taken as mere 'leftovers' (Zahidi, 2016), nowadays, they are regarded as 'independent professionals'.

Another study was conducted to discover marriage patterns, procreation, family values and family size in urban Punjab, Pakistan (Zafar, 2003). For achieving the objectives, a qualitative study consisting of fecund female participants belonging to the two major cities Faisalabad and Lahore from the age bracket 25-45 was involved.

The discussion of the study is comprised of four issues. The socioeconomic and demographic circumstances of the participants were questioned in the first section, and the contributors' views on the age of marriage, the purpose of marriage, family values, and family size were elicited in the second section to examine families and family values and determine the significance of single media women's family lives in Pakistani society.

When questioned about the ideal marriage age for modern working women, all respondents, with the exception of two, said that the age should be no less than 25, despite the fact that early marriage was regarded as the norm for females in Pakistan. Early on, they utterly rejected the notion of getting married. In terms of physical and mental maturity, the majority of respondents preferred the idea of late marriage. They claimed that the key elements for a successful personal and professional life are overall maturity, financial stability, and education completion. They argued that mature women had a stronger sense of responsibility for managing the family and dealing with challenges relating to work and family.

Furthermore, Anika Khan (2019) observed, "More women are getting higher education in Pakistan than in previous decades." She stated, "Based on data from the International Labor Organization, women having age range 15 years to 64 years, World Bank statistics plot a growth in overall female participation in the Pakistani

labour force from just over 12 per cent in 1995 to over an estimated 26 per cent in 2018." This proves that Pakistani women's education and financial stability have been prioritized in the modern era.

Singlehood in Pakistani women is a relatively new phenomenon. Educated women participating in professional fields like media and mass communication are the main driving forces that pioneered the trend of singlehood or no marriage in Pakistan. There is another trend of late marriage. The above research also revealed that these are the two leading motivations for delayed marriages. However, other researchers suggested more factors for delayed marriage in Pakistan. These are given below:

Focus on Higher Studies: These days, parents prefer educated girls to their sons. It implies that in order to be seen as a desirable wife, a woman must be well-educated. Additionally, in recent years, the joint family arrangement has started to break down in urban areas. The number of women entering various occupations and higher education has increased. More single Pakistani women are choosing to settle down alone according to Madiha Waris Qureshi (2017). More Pakistani single women now have the chance to study abroad, also because of many international scholarship programs like Fulbright and others supported by Pakistan's Higher Education Commission. This trend is currently growing, even in Pakistan. Beena Sarwar, a journalist and documentary producer from Pakistan whose work focuses on human rights and gender issues, has seen a steady increase in the number of Pakistani women who are stepping out on their own.

High Divorce Rates and Pre-planning: As mentioned before, families make sure their daughters could support themselves in case of divorce. Since the divorce rate is up nowadays families tend to pre-plan its aftermaths by making sure their daughters get higher education and financial stability, as Khan (2019) stated, "Education is not necessarily seen as a route to a professional career, but is often considered a safety net in case women are compelled to earn a living."

High Rates of Domestic Abuse: The Human Rights Commission Pakistan reported 1843 cases of domestic violence against women from 2004 to 2016. It is one of the leading reasons for the increasing figures of divorce and Pakistan working women opting for singlehood.

According to a research paper known as, Divorce Status and Its major Reasons in Pakistan by Shazia Ramzan (2018), the rate of taking *khula* in the country has spiked. More and more Pakistani working women have been observed to take *khula* and live on their own. The concept was not common about a decade ago. Daily Dawn newspaper also reiterated that the said trend multiplied by more than 700pc in 2020 (2021).

To put it briefly, the decision to complete education and seek financial stability for media women are two of the main factors for singlehood. In addition, continuously increasing divorce and *khula* rates, expanding urbanization and fear of domestic violence and abuse, infidelity, and growing liberalism - all contribute to the declining marriage rates and increasing singlehood in Pakistan for media women.

The main goal is to investigate how single media women feel about marriage, social expectations of their marital status, and their future aspirations. The study will give the foundation for how single female media professionals define their unique identities in relation to their marital status. It will also look into the attitudes, behaviours, and expectations that families and communities have for single media women.

Background of the Study

Marriage, in the male-dominated Pakistani society, is still seen as a success and 'accomplishment' for females. One of the women interviewed by researcher Raza (2019) claimed that "When I was overweight, people suggested me to shed weight to attract men otherwise nobody would marry me. They also suggested to apply whitening creams for the same purpose of attracting *rishtas*. Some people thought supporting my family financially is the main hurdle for me to get married." Indeed, single working women in Pakistan are persistently harried due to their singlehood. Even modern

families wish their single daughters to marry. Living alone is still perceived as unacceptable in the country.

A question arises here on the ideal marriageable age for women. In Pakistan, the minimum age for marriage, the marriageable age is eighteen years for females as per the new senate, Child Marriage Restraint Act. However, the average age at which individuals marry has also gone up significantly, particularly among young women. (Tabassum, 2016)

The pressure women face is also worth discussion. Nida Kirmani, an Associate Professor of Sociology, associated with the Lahore University of Management Sciences showed that the pressure of attaining the status of 'being married' can be detrimental to a working woman's self-esteem. Young girls are raised with the notion that marriage increases the value of a woman. No matter her accomplishments, the ultimate goal for her is to attain a good match ('RISHTA') and settle down. Without marriage, she is not considered settled in life. For non-conformist women (who resist this mindset), it becomes a relentless battle against societal norms. Nida adds further, "inadvertently shaming women for being single by making them feel like failures. Even when friends/relatives do this out of care and concern, this can be damaging." (dawn, 2019)

The trend has changed despite the pressure placed on women to get married. The defining elements of marriage have evolved over the past 10 years as divorce rates have increased and marriage rates have plummeted. In Pakistan today, divorce is rather prevalent. In 1998, 0.34 per cent of people were divorced; today, that number is closer to five or six per cent. These findings point to a significant increase in Pakistani women who are single. (Ramzan, 2018).

The reasons for growing divorce rates include infidelity, financial problems, domestic abuse, and mismatches. It seems false expectations in a relationship lead to bad experiences which then lead to a refusal to marry to avoid a similar situation. A successful marriage is hard work, and the qualities that are needed to keep a marriage healthy are not taught to children nowadays. This leads to the other reason

behind increasing singlehood, divorce. The new generation is exposed to unhealthy marriages and divorces and the fear of divorce makes many working women choose to stay single. (Altaf, 2016)

This paper refers to unmarried females as 'single women. According to Jill Reynolds, in 'Constructing the single woman in therapy,' to be single is to be not married.' Kanchan Gandhi (Living Single, 2016) stated, "The National Forum complicates the definition of a single woman as a 'woman who is not living with a man in a marital-like relationship' and includes widows, divorced and separated women and unmarried women above the age of 35 (these are its qualifications for becoming members of the single working women's collectives)." The marriageable age cutoff is 35 because, by this time, the majority of women are married, and those who prefer to remain single are expected to do so for a variety of reasons, including their financial independence.

While the trend of being single in Pakistan has become common in Pakistan, it still creates countless convolutions for women. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPC), it is highly challenging for a single media woman to survive alone due to gender-based prejudices and her economic dependence,' (Country Information and Guidance Pakistan, 2015). This is seen true for most single working women in small towns, districts, and relatively backward areas of the country. They live with their families as it is not socially acceptable for them to live alone. The case is different, however, for media women working in metropolitans such as Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. If a woman is educated, working in media (or any other industry), and has a sound financial background, it is easier for her to live alone. But this trend is still not matured yet. In a Zainab Saba Mir's report published in The News, the concept of single ladies attempting to rent accommodation is alien. Property dealers and homeowners dismiss this idea making it difficult for single females to find decent places to live.

The Research Directorate of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) described hitches for female single media person renters from urban areas. This causes them several

security concerns and other social constraints, for instance, they are tagged by the local community as being 'characterless'. Marvi Masud is a journalist. She writes in her 2020 Dawn news report that safety concerns raise for single gentlewomen living alone in the country.

Munnazzah Raza (Dawn, 2019) interviewed eight single Pakistani media women over the age of 30 to record their experiences as females living on their own. Her study established that most Pakistani overage single working women agreed that they did not stay single on purpose. Their attitude at a young age was to blame, however. One of the major excuses mentioned was stubbornness and obstinate behaviour in choosing a life partner. Despite that there are issues with being single, most Pakistani single media women who pursue higher education or focus on their careers do not depend on others. The reason is financial stability that education and a good career can promise makes them stronger. A 42-year-old single woman from the study mentioned above claimed that she was the breadwinner (earner) of her family and lost her parents earlier. Her words were, "I could see stress at home so I decided to work and contribute to the household. I heard about a media house in Karachi that needed an assistant; since that day-ten years have passed, and I am working for them." She continued that many people frowned upon her singlehood, "But I would say logon ka kaam hai baatein karna (It is the job of people to poke their noses into other people's life), they are not paying our bills, so we do not care."

International Labor Organization (ILO) conducted a study that shared conclusions. Pakistan has stereotypical societal norms. Trends are not favourable for women who work and live on their own. Usually, homeowners hesitate to lend their property to single working women. Parents/families also show reluctance to allow their daughters to stay away from homes, especially when decent and secure residential facilities are hard to find. Facilities for working women living alone are also inadequate. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that the government launched some working women hostels lately, but the demand for these accommodations exceeds the supply.

Methodology

This paper revolves around the experiences of single media women from the country, based on empirical research. This research is a subset of a bigger investigation surrounding female single media persons who focused on establishing their self-identity. To be specific, the study explores unmarried women's perceptions of working with the Pakistani media. Her idea on singlehood, social experiences, and resilience to cultural expectations and challenges are under analysis. The paper presents preliminary findings through structured interviews with three hundred women of media that are not married between the ages of 20 to 50. The respondents were reached out using social media and through the 'snowballing method'.

The respondents were questioned about their views on marriage and gender issues. The purpose was to determine how they felt about marriage as a social institution and how they perceived gender issues. The respondents were then questioned regarding the viewpoint and expectations of their family, friends, and peers towards their single status. Additionally, it was done in order to comprehend what single media women are supposed to do in terms of roles and responsibilities. The 5-point Likert scale, which ranges from Strongly Disagree to Slightly Disagree, Agree to Agree, and Slightly Agree to Strongly Agree, was used to measure the parameters.

In addition, respondents were asked questions that were open-ended about their future marriage plans, such as: Why aren't you married already? Are they planning to get married and why? What standards do they have for their future husband? And after getting married, how would their lives change? These questions aimed to learn more about the individual experiences and self-definition of media-working single women.

Findings

This study documented Pakistani single media women's standpoint on the notion of being unmarried and being a working woman living alone and the respondents' answers are recorded in the form of the given pie charts.

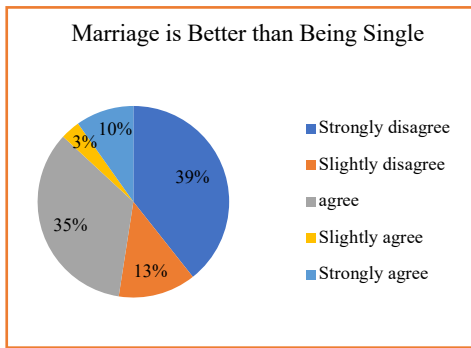


Figure 1: Upon asking the question "marriage is better than being single" 39% of women strongly disagreed, but 35% also agree with the statement.

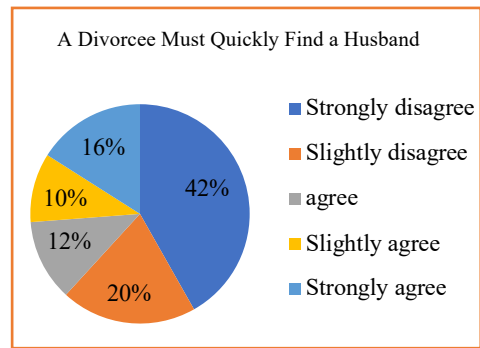


Figure 4: 42% of the respondents strongly disagree that a divorcee must find a husband, and 20% slightly disagree with the given statement.

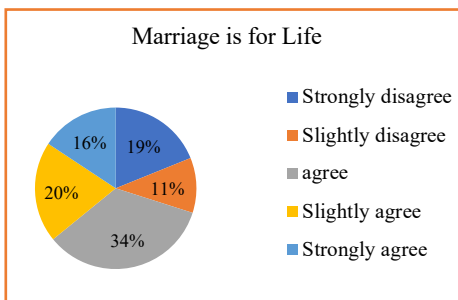


Figure 2: Respondents 34% agree with the statement that marriage is for life, however, 20% per cent slightly agree but 19% of the respondents strongly disagree that marriage is essential to living a life.

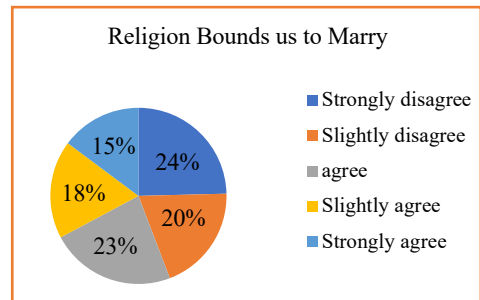


Figure 5: On asking 24% of the respondents strongly disagreed that religion bound us to marry, on the other hand, 23% also agree with the statement.

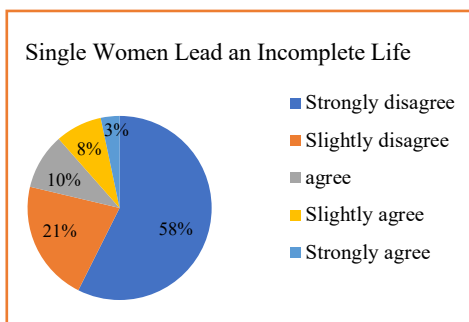


Figure 3: On this statement that single women lead an incomplete life a big parentage (58%) of the respondents strongly disagreed and 21% slightly disagree.

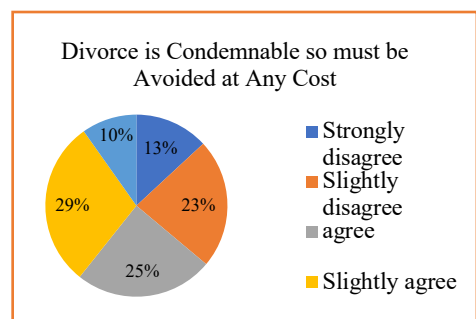


Figure 6: Divorce is condemnable and one should avoid it, 29 per cent of the women slightly agree and 25% of the women agree on this point.

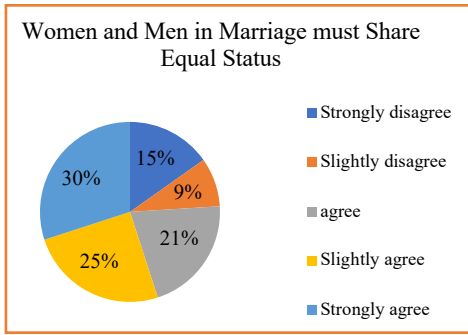


Figure 7: The strong agreement of 30% has been seen amongst respondents when asked that, Women and men in marriage must share equal status. And 25% and 21% of the respondents slightly agreed and agreed respectively.

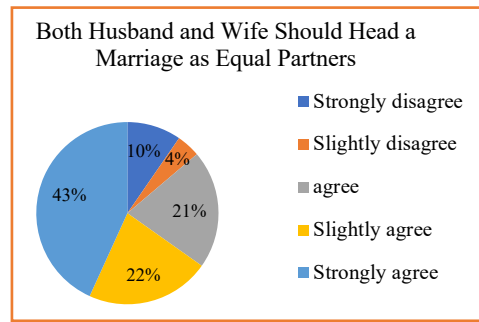


Figure 10: The equality in a marriage is supported by 43% of the respondents while 22% slightly agree that both women and men should head a marriage.

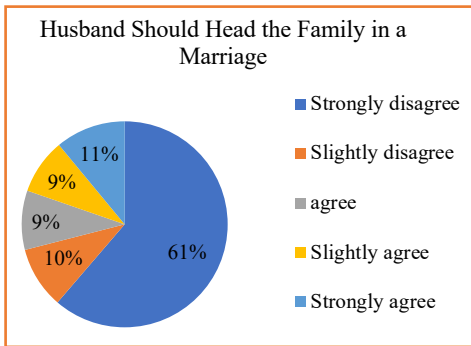


Figure 8: 61% of the respondents strongly disagree that the husband should be the head of the family, whereas just 11% strongly agree with the statement.

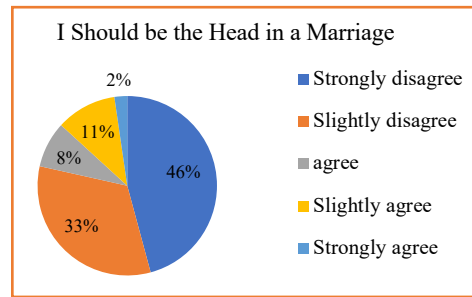


Figure 11: The figure shows the response about “I should be the head of a marriage”. 46% strongly disagreed with the responses, which means that 46% of respondents strongly disagree to be the head of marriage whereas strongly agree responses were only 2%.

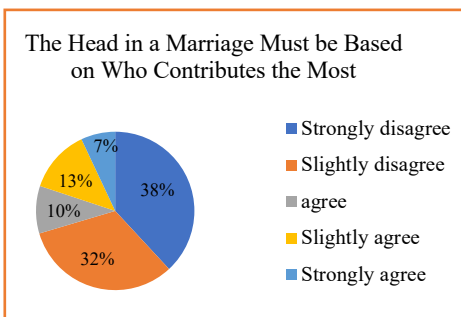


Figure 9: Who contributes most to the marriage, determines the head of the family, the statement is strongly disagreed by 38% of the media women while 32% slightly disagreed.

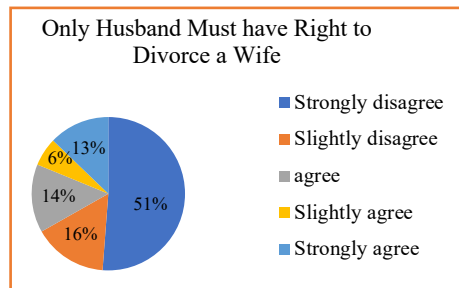


Figure 12: The large percentage (51%) of the respondents strongly disagree that only husbands must have the right to divorce a wife. On other hand, 13% strongly agree with the statement.

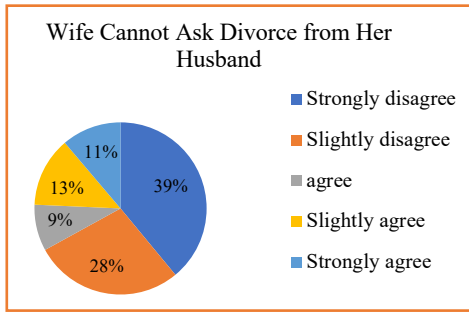


Figure 13: On this, 39% of the respondents strongly disagree, while 28% slightly disagree.

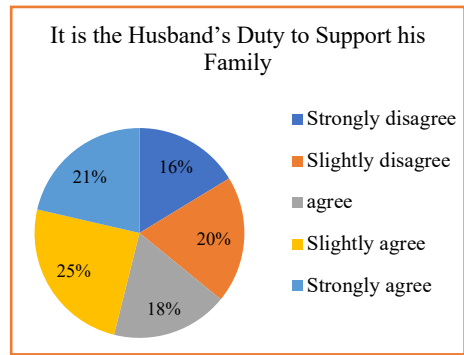


Figure 16: Mixed responses are received upon asking if it's the husband's duty to support his family, 25% of the respondents slightly agree while 21% strongly agree.

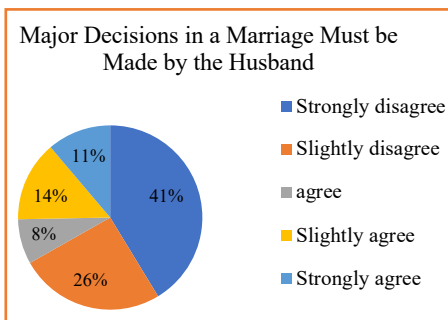


Figure 14: Major decisions must be taken by the husband are strongly disagreed with by 41% of the women, 26% slightly disagree while 11% agree with the statement.

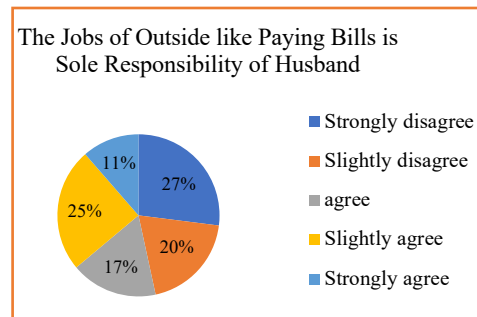


Figure 17: 27% of the respondents strongly disagree that the jobs outside like paying bills are the sole responsibility of the husband while 25% slightly agree with the statement.

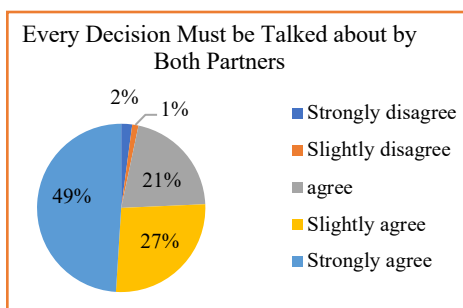


Figure 15: The respondents who agreed strongly are 49% while 27% slightly agree.

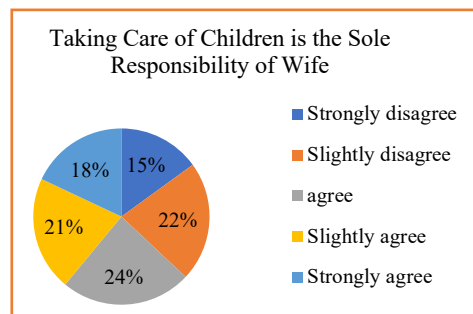


Figure 18: Taking care of children is the sole responsibility of the wife is slightly and strongly agreed by 21% and 18% of the women respectively, while 24% agreed with the statement.

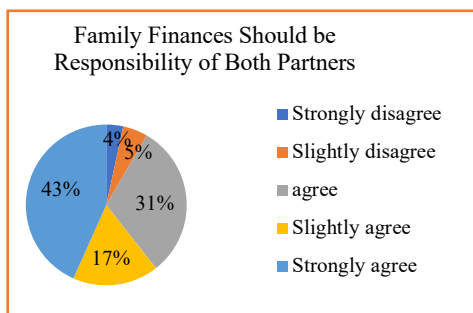


Figure 19: The respondents strongly agreed (43%) that family finances must be taken care of by both men and women while 31% agreed with the statement.

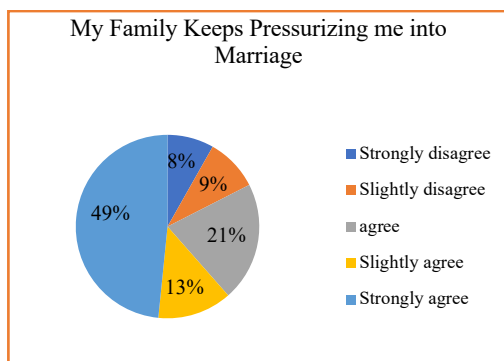


Figure 22: 49% of the media women strongly agreed that their family pressurize them to get married while 21% agreed on this too.

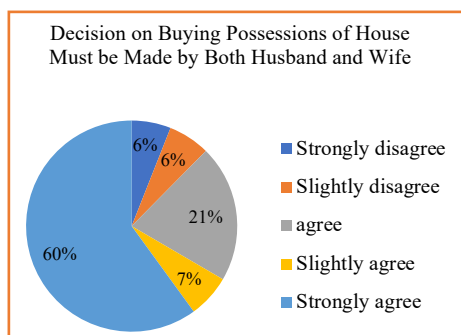


Figure 20: A large percentage (61%) strongly agreed that decisions on buying possessions must be both made by wife and husband while 21% agreed with the statement too.

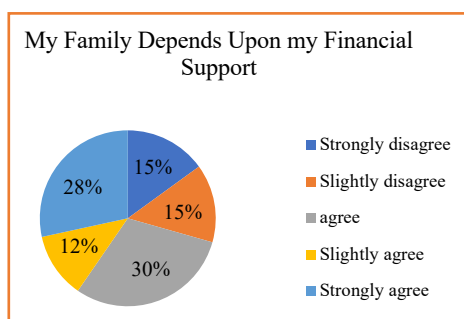


Figure 23: The respondents who agreed that their family depends on their financial support 30%, while 28% strongly agreed with this statement.

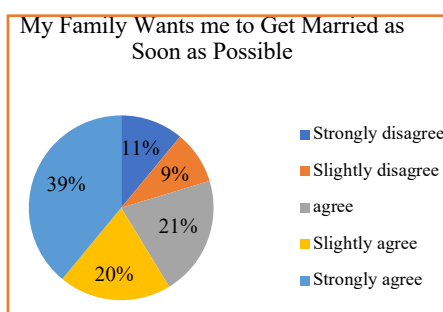


Figure 21: The family of the respondents who want them to get married as soon as possible is strongly agreed by 39% of the women, while 20% slightly agree and 21% agree on the statement.

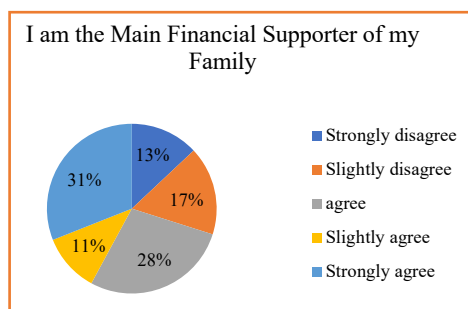


Figure 24: 31% of the respondent strongly agreed that they are the main financial support of the family while 38% agreed too.

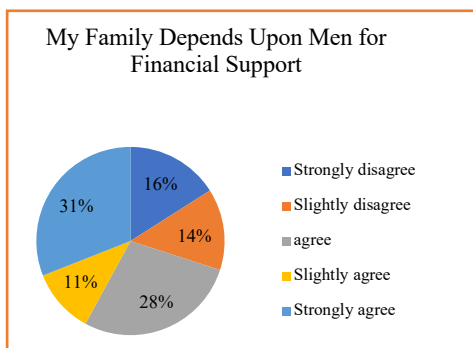


Figure 25: The family of the respondent who depends on men for financial support strongly agreed with 31% while 28% agreed with the statement too.

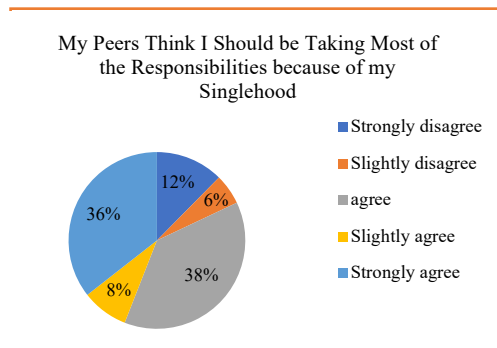


Figure 28: 38% of the respondents agreed that their peers think that they should be taking on most of the responsibilities as they are single, and 36% strongly agreed with the statement.

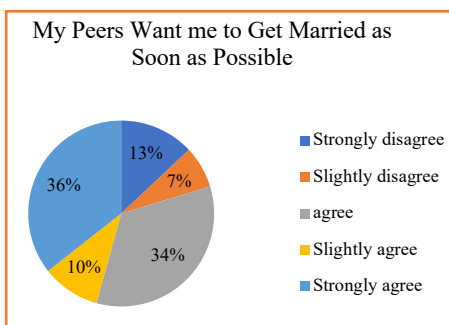


Figure 26: 36% of the respondents strongly agreed that their peers want them to get married as soon as possible while 34% agreed too.

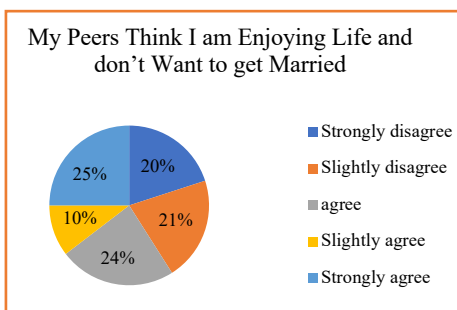


Figure 27: Upon asking the question peers of the respondents think they are enjoying life being single and don't want to get married, 24% agreed, while 21% slightly disagree and 20% strongly disagreed.

Discussion

These responses suggest that Pakistani single media women have quite an open-minded opinion regarding marriage and related issues. A higher number disagreed that a divorcee must find a husband, the finding is suggesting a stronger sense of independence in Pakistani single women, and dependence on men seem to be weakened greatly. In his research work, Mukesh Kumar Khatwani (2017) agreed that more women professionals have achieved independence through economic stability.

In a contrast, a large number also agreed that marriage is for life showing that while the sense of independence is there, the majority of Pakistani single women working in media organizations still prefer to find a man and get married. This notion is also proved in the book, Gender Economics: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice by the Management Association (2018). In that book, the author argued that despite attaining empowerment, women desire to marry at a later age.

Meanwhile, the independent nature of the respondents is reflected in the next part of the questionnaire. About 61% of women strongly disagreed with the statement, 'Men must be the head of the family,' with 43% strongly agreeing with both partners together must be heads of the marriage, a striking 51% strongly disagreed with the statement, 'only husband can divorce his wife.'

Although a majority of single females working with media believed in the institution of marriage, simultaneously, they showed their independence by not believing that men should be the heads of the family. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that both the wife and the husband should contribute to the family's well-being and household expenses.

Various studies validate this finding. Today, it is accepted for working women to contribute to their household with their husbands, according to an international study by OXFAM conducted in Pakistan about changing gender roles through economic development (2019).

Furthermore, the tradition that only husbands could divorce their wives is also dismissed. This finding was validated by the latest news reports. As per a 2021 Gallup Survey, 2021, there are more khula cases in courts registered than divorces by husbands in Pakistan.

In the section of the questionnaire where respondents were questioned about their experiences with social expectations, the response that received the largest percentage of yes votes was my family prefers if I be married, with 39% of respondents agreeing and 20% slightly agreeing. In 49% of cases, pressure from families to get married was reported. This result was also supported by a number of reports and investigations. The Daily Dawn claims that Pakistani women are frequently pressured into marriage, even if they work for themselves. (2019).

Surprisingly, a larger percentage agreed that their family wanted financial help, and most of them agreed that their family depends on men. Despite the fact that women also contribute to their households, the major responsibility remains on the opposite gender when it comes to supporting the family. These responses in this segment make it clear that single women affiliated with media organizations nowadays still get pressurized by family and peers to get married as before, and even modern families even expect female members to contribute to the family financially. However, family dependency on men is still in all-high as before.

In the open-ended section of the interview, when asked why they were not married, the

majority of women said that they were focusing on their education at the time. The other common answer is that they have not found the right person. A few participants also responded to this question in this way. They want to be established in their career first. While a few others replied that they were content with being single and that they were least interested in marriage. When asked if they had the desire to get married, the most common answer was yes, when asked why, most of them responded that they needed companionship, emotional support, and a halal relationship. Surprisingly, very few of the respondents wanted to marry for attaining financial stability and most of them wanted to marry because they were lonely.

Most women concurred that marriage remained significant to them despite their need for a future husband and the changes in their lives following marriage. The most common response to the first question, "The husband must be faithful," was followed by "Financially well off, affectionate, and supportive". When asked, 'How do you think your life would change in a marriage?' almost all the respondents replied that they would not be lonely; many replied that there would be more responsibilities, and a few replied that they would lose their independence. The responses here were almost contradicting each other, many agreed that they would have the companionship which they desired. However, they also felt burdened with responsibilities and a lack of independence. This outcome was also validated in the book, *Gender Differences in Different Contexts* by Aida Alvinus (2017).

In this book, the author discussed the psychology of working gentlewomen from Pakistan. The female workforce in the country after making their career desperately desires a companion. However, insecurities and their long-term singlehood also make them feel that marriage might snatch their independence.

Out of this segment, only a minority stated that they did not want to get married. They argued they were happy being single, and they do not want to be burdened with marriage. The answer is given here: "No, I am not sure, Not interested". They stated that they wanted to live their life the way they desired. While one media woman stated, "I think marriage is not a good

idea these days and ageing creates problems." Even some of the participants who wanted to get married responded that they could not be sure how their life would change in marriage as men had been very unpredictable.

Hence, there again was a mix of responses suggesting a definite social change is underway. It is safe to say that in the next ten to twenty years, more women will be allowed to join a profession of their like; decide whether they want to marry or stay single, and live with or without family.

It is also revealed that such females underwent high family and peer pressure regarding their decision to marriage. Mostly, they showed neutral views on a single life with a realistic approach to the idea of marriage, husband, divorce, instability in marriage and responsibilities associated with married life.

Moreover, many of them concurred that marriage was important and they were ready for it if they come across a suitable man. However, there were a number of females who did not agree with this idea. They pledged to stay unmarried to secure their independence. Respondents also believed that the notion of marriage was for life. However, khula should not be avoided if they fail to adjust with their partner.

The study examined the views of Pakistani media women who are single and have never been married; on marriage and associated ideas. Participants also provided slight feedback on gender roles and marital obligations. Additionally, they made it known that they were still hoping to get married (despite their mature ages). Overall, they showed positivity with their

current single status while still being open to the prospect of marriage. For them, a good life partner should have the following qualities: loyalty, caring, love, understanding, and financial security.

The study findings also indicated realistic and more 'open' expectations related to marriage. Therefore, it can be extracted from this research that single working women in Pakistan experienced positive aspects in their social life.

Note that the study did not seek a certain kind of answer from the prospects of single media women on marriage. It only attempted to comprehend their perspectives and experiences on being unmarried for a long time.

Conclusion

Marriage is considered a social bond between two individuals which is lawfully and socially acknowledged and is a phase of social development of the two families. In Pakistan majority of the people considered this social contract as a shield for women. This is why females have to undergo high family and peer pressure regarding their decision to marriage. However, there are many women, who prefer to be independent, economically strong, and have a desire for marriage but this need is different from the traditional concept. They always look for an ideal candidate for a life partnership who possesses basic qualities including loyalty, care, financial stability and do have respect for women's work routine, and sometimes this wait becomes too long so they prefer to be single.

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