

Educated Women’s Reproductive Decision-Making in Pakistan – A Standpoint Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the narratives of highly educated, working women in Pakistan regarding their reproductive choices, focusing on the power dynamics and institutional influences that shape the discourse around reproductive rights. The research draws inspiration from Michael Foucault’s emphasis on power hierarchies within familial institutions and Dorothy Smith’s standpoint theory. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with eight married women teachers aged 36–46, holding a PhD and master’s level of education at the International Islamic University. The qualitative case study, rooted in a postmodernist theoretical perspective, utilizes Foucauldian discourse analysis to uncover subtle ways power relations impact reproductive agency. The study also incorporates Dorothy Smith’s standpoint theory, highlighting the influence of social positions on women’s perspectives regarding reproductive rights. The findings reveal the complexities faced by educated women in Pakistan, as societal expectations and familial pressures shape their decisions regarding reproductive choices. Despite their knowledge and capabilities, participants grapple with subtle power dynamics, illustrating the need to navigate gender expectations within the socio-cultural context.

Introduction

Reproductive decisions encompass individuals’ choices regarding family planning, including determining the number of children, spacing between them, and, in some cases, selecting a child’s gender. These decisions are deeply personal and influenced by many factors, such as cultural norms, familial expectations, and individual aspirations (Alemayehu 2014).

The relationship between reproductive decisions and education among Pakistani women is a nuanced interplay. Education tends to equip women with knowledge, autonomy, and a broader perspective, empowering them to make informed choices about their reproductive health. However, societal norms and cultural expectations often intersect with educational advancements, creating a complex landscape where women navigate between traditional values and modern aspirations (Dadi 2021).

In Pakistani society, the socio-cultural setup plays a pivotal role in shaping reproductive decisions. The cultural emphasis on son preference, familial expectations, and the

influential role of older women, particularly mothers-in-law, can exert significant pressure on women’s choices (Habiba 2016). The experiences of highly educated women in negotiating their reproductive agency within this context unveil layers of challenges, opportunities, and the evolving dynamics of gender roles in Pakistani society. The study reveals how societal norms, even when confronted by educated and economically independent women, continue to influence reproductive decisions, highlighting the intricate balance between individual autonomy and societal expectations. As such, exploring reproductive decisions within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan provides valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of family planning in a complex and diverse society.

Previous research has shown that women’s contraceptive decision-making power is less in rural communities where women’s literacy status is low and economic dependence is high (Noureen, 2011) (Tilahun, 2011). Education is critical in empowering women to make informed

decisions about their reproductive lives. The research focuses on the experiences of highly educated independent women in urban areas of Pakistan. It aims to uncover how their experiences differ from those of less educated or illiterate women regarding family planning and decision-making. The shift in research focus recognizes the evolving roles and aspirations of highly educated women in Pakistani society and how their education may impact their ability to assert their autonomy in family planning decisions.

Review of Literature

The relationship between higher education, economic independence, and women's reproductive rights is complex and multifaceted. Higher education and financial independence can empower women to make informed decisions about their reproductive lives and access the necessary resources to exercise these choices. However, this relationship is not straightforward, as various factors such as family structure, socio-economic status, and cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping women's reproductive rights and decision-making processes. Highly educated females have new values and visions of their rights and entitlements. They are motivated to be free from a lifetime of poverty and to have control over their reproductive lives (Nabanita 2016). Higher education and economic independence can also influence the dynamics within households and families. For instance, the research highlights that education alone is insufficient to foster egalitarian decision-making within households, as family structure and the duration of marriage play significant roles in determining whether an egalitarian decision-making system exists (Benavot, 1989). Furthermore, the research underscores the notable significance of the mother-in-law's role in this context, as a daughter-in-law's autonomy within the household can be markedly affected by the nature of her mother-in-law, whether she adopts a repressive or supportive stance (Dixit, et al., 2022) (Habiba, 2016).

Naila Kabeer is a prominent feminist economist who has written extensively on gender, development, and social policy. Her work has focused on the intersection of gender, poverty, and social exclusion, and she has highlighted the importance of women's economic empowerment and reproductive rights in achieving gender equality and sustainable development (Kabeer, 2005). Studies have shown that the development of women's rights has a positive effect on contraceptive access for females with different educational attainment levels and that reproductive healthcare access is linked to labor market opportunities for women (Yuan, Li, & Wang, 2021). (Bahn, Kugler, Mahoney, Corley, & McGrew, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

In examining and evaluating the discourses and power relations surrounding the gender and reproductive rights of educated women in Pakistan, the study draws inspiration from the postmodern theoretical perspectives of Michael Foucault and Dorothy Smith. Foucault's theoretical framework emphasizes the pervasive influence of power hierarchies, particularly within institutions such as the family. According to Foucault (2000), familial institutions systematically control these power structures, and the quest for knowledge is intricately linked to institutional support and distribution. The exertion of this "will to knowledge" imposes pressure and constraint on other forms of discourse, shaping the narratives and discourses surrounding various societal issues, including reproductive rights.

Applying this perspective to the context of educated women in Pakistan, the study seeks to unravel how power dynamics and institutional influences impact reproductive rights discourse. Educated women, despite their knowledge and capabilities, may still grapple with societal expectations and familial pressures that shape their decisions regarding reproductive choices. By adopting a Foucauldian lens, the study aims to uncover the subtle ways in which power relations influence and constrain the reproductive agency

Title: *Educated Women's Reproductive Decision-Making in Pakistan – A Standpoint Analysis*

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of educated women in Pakistan, shedding light on the complexities of navigating gender expectations within a socio-cultural context.

The study draws inspiration from Dorothy Smith's standpoint theory, which posits that individuals' social positions shape their perspectives. In the specific context of reproductive rights among educated women in Pakistan, this theory suggests that women's experiences are influenced by their social standing, especially concerning the prevailing dominance of the family. According to Smith, a pervasive "male subtext" within societal structures can result in the exclusion of women from power dynamics, particularly in decisions related to reproductive rights (Smith, 1987).

Building upon the framework of Dorothy Smith, the research explores how women's standpoint on reproductive rights is intricately linked to various factors, including the collaboration of her husband and mother-in-law and the duration of marriage. The education level of a woman's husband is identified as a significant determinant influencing her standpoint.

The research contends that the cooperation between a woman and her husband, as well as the dynamics with her mother-in-law, play pivotal roles in shaping her standpoint on reproductive rights. In the specific context of reproductive decision-making, the duration of marriage is considered a crucial determinant. Over time, marital relationships evolve, and the dynamics between spouses may change. The length of the marriage bond can impact the level of mutual understanding and cooperation between a woman and her husband in making decisions related to reproductive rights. For instance, in the early stages of marriage, couples may navigate and negotiate their roles and responsibilities. As the duration of marriage extends, the level of collaboration and communication between spouses may evolve, potentially influencing a woman's standpoint. Long-term marriages may witness shifts in power dynamics, with couples developing more equitable decision-making processes or, conversely, experiencing increased

traditionalism in gender roles. The duration of marriage also allows for a deeper integration into familial structures, including relationships with in-laws. Over time, women may establish stronger bonds with their mother-in-law, influencing their standpoint on reproductive decisions.

Standpoint theory emphasizes the significance of social relationships and positions in influencing one's standpoint. The prolonged duration of marriage allows women to become more deeply integrated into familial structures, fostering relationships with in-laws, particularly the mother-in-law. As these relationships develop over time, they contribute to shaping the woman's standpoint on various issues, including decisions related to reproductive rights.

It underscores the idea that even educated, financially independent women may not be entirely autonomous in decision-making processes, as their perspectives are intricately woven into the fabric of familial and societal structures. By examining these multifaceted influences, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how various factors collectively contribute to shaping women's standpoint regarding reproductive rights in the context of educated women in Pakistan.

Furthermore, incorporating postmodern theoretical underpinnings, notably influenced by Michel Foucault, adds depth to my understanding. Foucault's insights into power structures and knowledge dynamics are particularly relevant in unraveling the socio-cultural context of reproductive experiences among educated women in Pakistan. By applying these theoretical frameworks, the study aims to illuminate how the male-centric influences within societal organizations impact the discourse and practices surrounding reproductive rights, specifically for educated women in Pakistan. This approach recognizes the nuanced interplay between power, discourse, and women's lived experiences in reproductive decision-making.

Methodology**Study Design**

This qualitative study is underpinned by a methodological framework rooted in the postmodernist theoretical perspective, which posits reality as a subjective phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). As a result, I have opted for an interpretive and constructivist approach. This methodological stance enables me to meticulously explore the complexities of reproductive rights in Pakistan, acknowledging the inherent subjectivity of individuals' experiences. Through this interpretive lens, I aim to develop nuanced insights that shed light on the multifaceted aspects of reproductive rights within the Pakistani context. I have chosen the case study method for data collection and conducted face-to-face interviews to get in-depth information.

Locale and Population

The area chosen for this study was the faculty of social science at International Islamic University. International Islamic University is the representative university of Pakistan at the national and international levels. Teachers from all over Pakistan with different ethnicities and cultures work and teach here. In every department, there are teachers from different areas of Pakistan. A total number of eight married women teachers were interviewed as the point of saturation was reached. The target population for this study was married teachers aged 36–46 years with a PhD level of education.

Sample

This is a qualitative study, so a non-probability technique was applied, and female teachers were selected through the purposive/criterion sampling method to conduct in-depth interviews. Respondents were divided into two categories according to the age groups of 36-40 and 41-46. The duration of marriage was also divided into two categories: up to five years of marriage duration and up to ten years. The duration of marriage and the age of women are closely linked with decision-making concerning reproductive rights, and this study specifically connected the

age and duration of marriage with reproductive rights.

Tool for Data Collection

Considering the objective and research questions, I developed an open-ended interview guide for in-depth interviews. The interview guide was changed or modified during face-to-face interviews.

Table1. Brief profile of Participants

Participants	Discipline	Positions /Rank	Age	Work Experiences
Participant A	Education	Assistant Professor	36 yrs	11 yrs
Participant B	Pakistan Studies	Associate Professor	46 yrs	13 yrs
Participant C	Political Science	Assistant Professor	43 yrs	9 yrs
Participant D	Sociology	Assistant Professor	41 yrs	12 yrs
Participant E	Sociology	Senior Lecturer	31 yrs	13 yrs
Participant F	Islamic Studies	Senior Lecturer	38 yrs	10 yrs

Participant G	Education	Assistant Professor	42 yrs	11 yrs
Participant H	History	Assistant Professor	39 yrs	11 yrs

Data Collection

The data was collected during the summer of 2022 through extensive interviews. The interview guide began with preliminary questions covering participants' demographic backgrounds, such as age, education, designation, marital status, etc. Following these initial inquiries, the discussions progressed into a more specific and in-depth exploration of reproductive rights. The researcher personally reached out to all participants, extending invitations to participate in the study through individualized emails sent to their official accounts.

The interviews took place at the convenience of university teachers in their offices. Informed consent was obtained, and audio recorders were used. Field notes captured important observations. Participants, surprisingly, openly shared experiences on decisions about the number of children, age gaps, husband support, and mother-in-law interference—topics typically considered private in Pakistan. Despite initial hesitations, the personal relevance of the research motivated enthusiastic participation. The established trust shared university affiliation, and participants' interest in women's issues facilitated open discussions. However, some women declined participation due to time constraints and heavy work commitments without personal reservations.

Data Analysis

The entire process of interpreting and analyzing data on women's subjective experiences with reproductive rights was guided by Foucault's

discourse analysis (Morison 2021). Interviews were conducted in English and Urdu, with the researcher handling all aspects, including transcription. The Urdu transcripts underwent meticulous translation into English, cross-verified by a language expert to preserve cultural nuances. Close and repeated readings of the transcripts were then performed to ensure consistency, leading to the identification of various pertinent discursive codes and themes.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted with transparency and integrity. The aims and objectives of the study were explained to informants before conducting interviews. Complete secrecy and privacy of the information provided by them was maintained. Each respondent was shown as "anonymous," and their original identity was not disclosed at any stage. Additionally, the researcher refrained from harming any respondent physically or emotionally during the process of data collection. The names of the departments selected for data collection have not been disclosed to ensure data confidentiality.

Key findings

The in-depth interviews with the participants in this study yielded four key themes, including decisions regarding the number of children, decision-making regarding the gap between children, sex selection and duration of the marriage. These will be discussed below.

Decisions regarding the number of children

The dynamics of family planning often involve complex negotiations and decisions within marital relationships. The experiences of individuals A and H shed light on the unexpected twists that can occur in the pursuit of family size preferences. Initially desiring a limited number of children, the couples found themselves facing unforeseen circumstances as they unexpectedly conceived additional pregnancies after having two children. In defiance of their husbands' recommendations for abortion, these women chose to continue with the pregnancies, thereby asserting their autonomy in matters of family

planning. This decision to challenge their husbands' wishes reflects the intricate interplay of personal agency and spousal influence in the realm of reproductive choices. This narrative unfolds against the backdrop of evolving societal norms and changing perspectives on family planning. Scholars have highlighted the importance of autonomy in reproductive decision-making, emphasizing the need for individuals to assert control over their fertility. Additionally, the role of spousal influence and negotiation in family planning decisions has been explored in various cultural contexts (Dadi, Bogale, Minda, & Megersa, 2021). The stories of A and H provide a nuanced exploration of how couples navigate these complex dynamics, showcasing instances where personal agency takes precedence over conventional expectations and prescribed norms in the realm of family planning.

Me and my husband initially planned to have only one or two kids, but things changed after our second child, and we had to deal with more pregnancies. My husbands wanted us to abort the unexpected pregnancies, but I decided to continue with the pregnancies. I felt asserting my autonomy in these matters and challenging my husband's recommendations was essential (Participant A).

In the face of unexpected challenges, I learned to trust my instincts and stand by my decisions, even when they differed from my husband's initial expectations. It was a journey of self-discovery and self-empowerment (Participant H).

Participant A shared that her third and fourth children were conceived unexpectedly, taking her and her husband by surprise. In response, her husband recommended considering abortion, but she ultimately chose to continue with the pregnancy. For her, it was paramount to assert her autonomy in the decision-making process, solidifying her choice to expand their family to four children. She now regards her family as ideal, balancing two daughters and two sons perfectly.

Similarly, Participant H, who entered matrimony during the third semester of her MS degree program, shared her unique experience. Her husband had been explicit about his priorities, emphasizing the importance of family and expressing his unwillingness to accommodate any delays in starting their family because of her academic pursuits. She concurred with her husband's perspective, and together, they decided to begin their family to have two children. She stated,

The decision was mutual, and I found great satisfaction in aligning with my husband's perspective of commencing our family journey with two children and contemplating a third child in due time (Participant H).

The importance of higher education and employment in influencing reproductive choices becomes apparent through the journey of Participant C, who made independent decisions in this regard. Her husband had been supportive of her choices. She now has a daughter and a son, and she considers her family whole. She stated,

I autonomously determined the number of children in our family, and I'm grateful that my husband and in-laws never raised objections. They consistently supported my choices. My knowledge and independent status played a significant role in earning their trust regarding my decisions.

Participant D emphasized her complete independence in making decisions related to family planning. She has two children, a son and a daughter, and she's content with the size of the family, harboring no desire for more children. Her work commitments make it challenging to provide adequate care for children. Her husband supports her decision in this matter. However, she also noted that the situation might have been different if her existing children were girls. Hailing from a profoundly patriarchal rural background, Participant D shared her past experiences, particularly during her first pregnancy, when her mother-in-law had strong desires for a grandson. The pressure was so intense that she began praying for a baby boy. This pressure continued into her second

pregnancy, and she yearned for a son again, as she had witnessed the elevated status of women who bore sons in her family.

The second pregnancy was marked by stress and fear due to the potential disappointment and reactions of her in-laws if she were to have another baby girl. Despite giving birth to a baby girl, her in-laws were happy, as she already had a son, highlighting the complex dynamics of play within her family. She says, I chose not to expand our family further because of my apprehension about having another daughter. My mother-in-law repeatedly emphasized the importance of having a pair of boys, and I want to avoid finding myself in that distressing situation again (Participant D).

This case serves as a poignant illustration of how even financially self-reliant women can become vulnerable to societal stigmatization and emotional distress, ultimately manifesting as mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety. These difficulties arise from the deeply ingrained son preferences within Pakistani society, where the act of giving birth to a son is often not an autonomous decision but rather one influenced and determined by the expectations and pressures exerted by extended families.

The experiences of Participant E and Participant F shed light on the crucial role that the support and encouragement of older women in the household play in empowering younger women to exercise agency, particularly in matters of family planning. In both cases, the endorsement and validation from their mothers-in-law proved pivotal. This support was not arbitrary but partly stemmed from the younger women's status as contributors to the family income and their educational background. Their roles as working and educated women seemed to have elevated their standing within the household and contributed to their capacity to make autonomous decisions. Interestingly, both participants shared how, after marriage, they became aware of their husband's deference to their mother-in-law's opinions on various domestic issues, indicating the matriarch's dominant position within the household—this dynamic created apprehension, particularly in

matters related to family planning, where intrusion was a concern.

However, to their relief, these mothers-in-law recognized their daughters-in-law's professional and educational accomplishments. The mother-in-law explicitly conveyed that, as qualified working women, these younger women should possess the autonomy to make decisions regarding family planning. The mother-in-law's words not only underscored the significance of a woman's education and employment but also highlighted the importance of intergenerational support and empowerment within the family structure, which is evident from the following statements.

Nobody, not even your husband, should have the final say in your family planning decisions. You are the one who knows best how many children you can responsibly care for alongside your job (Mother-in-Law of Participant E).

I was surprised by the unexpected support from my in-laws. My husband empowered me, granting me full authority to determine the number of children we should have. He didn't even express any preferences for boys or girls. We now have three daughters, and we do not desire more children (Participant E).

Family planning decision-making must lie with you, as only you can assess what aligns best with your job and life (Mother-in-Law of Participant F).

I never expected a supportive attitude from my in-laws. My husband's unwavering support and his grant of full authority for me to decide about our family's size, without any gender bias, have been a significant source of confidence. We now have one son and three daughters, and neither envisions having more children (Participant F).

In Pakistani families, the mother-in-law typically occupies a prominent and influential role, often being the key decision-maker, especially concerning the number of grandchildren (Saavala & Kulmala, 2010). This significant authority vested in the mother-in-law

can largely be attributed to her extensive life experiences and accumulated knowledge, highly regarded within the family structure. However, it's important to note that disagreements and differences of opinion often arise among family members, particularly between the mother-in-law, husbands, and wives, when it comes to decisions about family planning, including the number of children. These differences reflect the evolving dynamics within Pakistani households (Waheed, Hassan, Arif, Abbas, & Azmat, 2020).

The findings from this study suggest that the traditional family dynamics and roles, particularly the influential position of mothers-in-law in decisions related to family planning, are changing. This transformation is exemplified in the last case study, where the mother-in-law played a supportive and empowering role, allowing her daughter-in-law to make autonomous decisions about the number of children in the family. This shift in attitude likely stems from recognizing the daughter's education and exposure to the outside world through her job, which are valuable assets for making informed and autonomous decisions about family planning (Kumar, Valeria, & Raya, 2016).

It can be concluded that societal expectations often shape an individual's thoughts, behavior, and interactions. However, some cases within this theme also illustrate that, despite being educated and employed, women may need to navigate and re-negotiate their power dynamics within their households, especially concerning decisions that require independent agency. These cases underscore the ongoing transformation of traditional family roles and the evolving influence of education and economic autonomy on women's lives and their ability to make autonomous decisions.

Decisions regarding the gap between children

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that, in developing countries, men are often considered decision-makers in various family matters (Alemayehu, Hailesellasié & Biruh, 2014). However, scholarship in this field also underscores a significant shift in this dynamic among educated women. Highly educated

women who possess a positive attitude towards family planning tend to exhibit a notable increase in their decision-making power, mainly concerning matters like the spacing of children (Alemayehu, Hailesellasié & Biruh, 2014; Dadi, Bogale, Minda, & Megersa, 2021).

The findings of this study illustrate that there has been a notable shift towards recognizing women as key stakeholders in various aspects of family decision-making, including those related to the spacing of children. This transformation is underpinned by the principles of gender equality and the realization that women's perspectives and voices are crucial in shaping family planning dynamics. In many households, discussions about the spacing of children now include both spouses' perspectives and preferences, recognizing that both partners' well-being and aspirations are interconnected. This signifies a more equitable distribution of power within the family and a shift towards shared decision-making that considers the desires and capabilities of women in addition to those of their husbands. The following excerpts evidence this

I made autonomous decisions regarding the spacing of my children. My first two are two years apart, followed by a gap of four years before the arrival of my third son and another five years before having the fourth child (Participant A).

The timing of my children's births was entirely my decision. I spaced my first two children two years apart, then waited four years for my third son and another five years for my fourth child (Participant H).

However, Participant C initially had the decision made by her husband in the early stages of their marriage concerning the gap between their children, although she was involved in determining the timing of their subsequent children. She stated that

Initially, my husband decided that we should have children immediately after marriage. While I didn't object to this decision, I believe he was the one who determined the spacing between the births of our first two children. However, I

later realized I should have a say in deciding the gap between our children (Participant C).

This participant also held the belief that the sex of the child influences the spacing between children. If the first baby is a girl, the second baby is expected to arrive soon after, leaving no room for a carefully planned gap. However, the pressure for a quick second child is lessened if the first child is a boy. She stated.

My in-laws also expected to have a first male child; in the case of the female child, I would be bound to have another child quickly (Participant C).

The statement suggests that the children's gender significantly influences the spacing between children. Cultural and familial expectations surrounding the gender of the first child play a significant role in determining the timing and spacing of subsequent births. These expectations can influence family planning decisions and childbearing dynamics within a family.

Participant B chose not to have a baby immediately after marriage due to her ongoing studies, as she aimed to complete her degree first. Her husband supported her decision, and their first child was born two years into their marriage. Throughout her studies, her husband provided significant cooperation. Participant F had similar views and appreciated her husband's approach. In her case, her husband entrusted her with all decisions related to the spacing between their children and did not impose any restrictions regarding the gender of their children or the timing of their births.

My husband and I have decided on the number of children we want and the spacing between them. He has never imposed his authority or preferences on me; instead, he values and prefers my choices. He believes an educated woman can independently make decisions contributing to the family's well-being (Participant B).

I appreciate my husband's approach; he trusts my judgment regarding family planning decisions. He doesn't impose any restrictions on

the gender of our children or the timing of their births. My husband and I believe that an educated woman can make informed and independent decisions for the benefit of the family (Participant F).

Women's autonomy in decisions regarding the spacing of children is influenced by various factors, including the gender of their first child, the support of their mother-in-law, and the level of education and encouragement their husbands provide. Women can exercise independent decision-making when their husbands grant them the authority to participate in such choices. The education and socialization of husbands also play a pivotal role in empowering women regarding family planning. An educated husband is more likely to appreciate the significance of collaborative decision-making. It is evident that women sometimes hold differing opinions from their husbands, but due to their knowledge and self-reliant status, they can make autonomous decisions. For instance, as exemplified by one of the participants who rejected the suggestion of abortion and chose to carry the pregnancy according to her preferences.

Additionally, women often perceive that the gender of their first child can impact their family planning decisions. The supportive role of the mother-in-law within the family dynamic is also observed; when a husband is willing to delegate full authority to his wife in determining her reproductive rights, it often coincides with the endorsement and support of the mother-in-law. This dynamic underscores the influence of older women in reinforcing traditional patriarchal structures in Pakistan.

Decisions regarding sex selection

Gender preference and the influence of women in choosing the sex of their children are intricate aspects of family dynamics in Pakistan. The families tend to hold mothers of sons in high regard, as having sons elevates women's social status. Conversely, women who have only daughters may encounter social humiliation and stress within their homes. Women with at least one male child often play a more substantial role in household decisions. Furthermore, well-

educated and qualified women are better equipped to comprehend their position within the household and can assess potential strategies to enhance their influence (Javed & Mughal, 2018).

Participant A's family composition includes two sons and two daughters. Her firstborn was a girl, followed by the birth of two sons and a daughter as the youngest. The significance of the child's gender became apparent within the context of her in-laws, who hailed from an uneducated and traditional background. The gender of her children held great importance to them. Upon the birth of her first baby girl, Participant A's husband was overjoyed. However, when he shared this news with his mother, she responded with, "Allah beta bhi day ga (God will bless you with a son also) instead of offering congratulations." Her husband was deeply dissatisfied with his mother's response, as it marred what should have been a moment of happiness. Participant A believes that a woman's choices are significantly influenced by the culture and traditions of her family. Often, she feels compelled to conform to societal expectations and manipulates her desires to appease her family and society. While she views boys and girls as equal, she admitted that due to the pressures exerted by her in-laws, she, too, wished for sons, a sentiment she candidly shared.

The sex of the child is like an exam; if you give birth to a boy, you pass, but if you give birth to a girl, you fail (Participant A)

Participant B shared her experience, recounting that her first child was a baby girl, which did not elicit joy from her in-laws. They immediately began pressing for another baby and had their hopes set on a baby boy. While Participant B's husband was delighted with the birth of his daughter, he felt immense pressure from his family to have another child promptly. When she became pregnant for the second time, Participant B found herself fervently praying for a baby boy. Her wishes were granted with the birth of her second and third sons, eventually bringing happiness and contentment to her in-laws. As a result, her standing within the family strengthened significantly following the births of her two sons. Both Participant B and her husband

are highly educated individuals, and they believed that the gender of their children was not of great importance. However, recognizing the cultural expectations placed on every couple to have sons, they found satisfaction in having their prayers answered with the birth of two sons.

Participant F belongs to a very traditional patriarchal family where male children are preferred as they are considered an honor for the family. She felt that her position became much more robust due to her two boys.

Participant D has two children, one son and one daughter. Following the birth of her baby boy, she noticed a noticeable increase in her standing within the family. During her pregnancy, her mother-in-law had openly expressed her desire for a grandson and preferred the first child to be a boy. This highlighted the strong inclination within her family for male offspring, leading Participant D to pray for a son's birth.

No one aspires to have a baby girl, and having boys is widely regarded as a matter of great honor, with a strong preference for the first child being a baby boy (Participant F).

The societal mindset leans heavily toward favoring boys, and having a baby girl is often seen as less preferable, with a strong inclination to have the first child as a male (Participant D).

In Pakistan, women, despite achieving higher education and attaining independent economic status, often find themselves unable to make decisions regarding the sex of their child autonomously (Namdeo, 2017). The desire for male offspring is driven by the need to conform to the expectations of their in-laws and husbands. This inclination is mainly due to the relentless societal messages that emphasize the belief that a male child will strengthen a woman's relationship with her husband and secure her place within her in-laws' household.

Reproductive Decision-making and duration of marriage

Women's decision-making power in reproduction is closely tied to the initial years of their marriage. During this period, families and

husbands often do not readily grant autonomy to women. However, as time passes, women gradually succeed in gaining the trust and confidence of their families. This increased trust enables them to make decisions about reproductive matters autonomously and exercise greater agency over family planning.

Participant A revealed that in the early years of her marriage, she had limited involvement in decision-making, especially regarding family planning. Her husband had initially expressed a desire for them to have four children. However, as time passed, she observed a shift in their dynamic. Her husband began consulting her on various matters, and even after the birth of their first two children, he eventually entrusted her with full autonomy to make decisions about their family planning. Consequently, she chose to carry and have the last two babies herself.

In the early years of my marriage, I found myself entirely dependent on my husband, and he essentially made decisions that impacted our family. However, a significant change occurred after six to seven years, when our elder daughter was six and our son was four. I became pregnant again while pursuing my Ph.D. At this point, my husband suggested considering an abortion, but I firmly opposed that idea and chose to carry our third and fourth children to terms (Participant A).

Participant C shared that she had been a working woman before her marriage, and her father had empowered her to make independent decisions. However, during the initial years of her marriage, she faced numerous challenges and difficulties. After a few years of their marriage, the husband gave his wife complete authority and control over decisions concerning their children's education, household affairs, and family planning. He trusted and empowered his wife to make these decisions independently, without his direct input or interference.

I was not accustomed to seeking advice or consulting with others when making decisions. Initially, it proved to be a significant adjustment for me to consult my husband, even on minor matters. However, I understood my husband's

crucial role in my life over time. Gradually, my husband began to appreciate my decisions and suggestions (Participant C).

Participant D's experience highlights her journey in a joint family setup. Initially, she observed that all decisions were made by her mother-in-law, to the extent that her husband even consulted his mother for every matter. Participant D vividly remembers her husband warning her to seek her mother-in-law's permission for everything. However, her circumstances changed after two years of marriage when she relocated to another city due to her husband's job. There, she noticed a shift in her husband's behavior; he no longer consulted her mother-in-law for every decision. Over ten years of marriage, Participant D began to feel fully autonomous in her decision-making, a level of independence she couldn't have imagined in the presence of her mother-in-law. She noted that her role had transformed from merely agreeing with every decision made by her husband to now having her husband agree with her choices.

In her view, the duration of marriage and the family structure play significant roles in determining women's empowerment, and her journey reflects the evolving power dynamics within her family over time. For Participant H, the duration of her marriage and the family structure were crucial determinants of her empowerment, with her experience reflecting the evolving dynamics within her family.

After my marriage, I felt my role was to agree with my husband's decision. However, after ten years, it seems like my husband's role has evolved to agree with every decision I make (Participant H).

Participant E, who married at seventeen, was initially considered a child within her in-laws' household. Her mother-in-law and husband did not involve her in any family matters. However, after a few years of marriage, she gained full empowerment and autonomy to make decisions concerning her reproductive health.

I was just a child when I got married at seventeen. Initially, I had no say in family matters

and wasn't involved in any decisions (Participant E).

The experiences of three participants highlight the significance of the initial years of marriage in their lives. What's common among these participants is that they were already employed and highly educated in their marriage. This pre-existing education and employment status likely contributed to their empowerment and independence. During the initial years of marriage, they faced the crucial task of building trust with their husbands and in-laws. This trust was pivotal in gaining autonomy to make decisions about family planning. Over time, as their marriages progressed, they continued to assert their autonomy and independence, becoming even more self-reliant in making decisions about various aspects of their family life.

The initial years of my marriage were a turning point. My education and employment background allowed me to gain trust within my new family, ultimately leading to autonomy in family planning decisions (Participant G).

Being educated and already employed at the time of my marriage was instrumental. During those early years, I worked hard to establish trust with my husband and in-laws, eventually granting me the independence to make family planning decisions (Participant B).

In the early days of my marriage, my education and employment status played a significant role in gaining my family's trust. This trust gave me the freedom to make decisions about family planning, and over time, my autonomy was enhanced (Participant E).

The initial years of marriage acted as a crucial period of transition, during which these women leveraged their education and employment status to gain the trust of their spouses and in-laws. This trust, in turn, paved the way for greater autonomy in family planning decisions, and their independence continued to grow over time.

Discussion

The narratives on women's decisions regarding family planning, child spacing, and sex selection can be examined through Dorothy Smith's Feminist Standpoint Theory and Michel Foucault's Power Discourse. According to Smith, women's experiences and perspectives are shaped by their social positions and roles within the family. The accounts of women negotiating family planning decisions highlight how their educational backgrounds and employment status influence their autonomy. Smith's standpoint theory underscores the significance of understanding women's experiences within the familial context.

Simultaneously, Michel Foucault's Power Discourse provides a framework for analyzing the power dynamics inherent in these narratives. The resistance shown by women against societal expectations, such as preferences for male children, reflects a form of power negotiation within familial structures. The narratives depict how women navigate and challenge power relations, particularly concerning decisions that require independent agency.

Moreover, the role of the mother-in-law as an influential figure in shaping family decisions aligns with Foucault's emphasis on power operating through discourse. The changing attitudes over time, as illustrated in the narratives, suggest a transformation in societal discourses surrounding family planning and decision-making. Foucault's power discourse theory sheds light on how individuals, in this case, women, exercise agency within the constraints of societal expectations and power structures.

Dorothy Smith's Feminist Standpoint Theory provides insights into how women's social positions inform their experiences. At the same time, Michel Foucault's Power Discourse helps unveil the power relations and negotiations embedded in these narratives, offering a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between gender, power, and decision-making within familial and societal contexts.

The discussion on women's decisions regarding family planning, child spacing, and sex selection can be related to three Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), and Gender Equality (SDG 5).

Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3)

Women's decisions regarding family planning are closely linked to their health and well-being. Access to reproductive health services, including family planning and maternal care, is essential for ensuring the overall health of women.

Narratives highlighting women's autonomy in family planning decisions underscore the importance of providing comprehensive and accessible healthcare services. Empowering women to make informed choices contributes to their well-being and the well-being of their families. Addressing the power dynamics and negotiating societal expectations in family planning decisions aligns with the intention to promote mental health and resilience as women navigate and challenge established norms to make choices that align with their well-being.

Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10)

Dorothy Smith's Feminist Standpoint Theory emphasizes the influence of social positions and roles within the family on women's experiences. Recognizing and addressing these social positions is crucial for reducing gender-based inequalities.

Educational backgrounds and employment status are highlighted as factors influencing women's autonomy in family planning decisions. Ensuring equal access to education and employment opportunities for women reduces disparities and promotes a more equitable society.

The narratives also depict resistance against societal expectations, such as preferences for male children, indicating a pushback against gender inequalities. Analyzing and challenging

these expectations contributes to the broader goal of reducing gender disparities and promoting equality within familial and societal structures.

Gender Equality (SDG 5)

Dorothy Smith's Feminist Standpoint Theory and Michel Foucault's Power Discourse contribute to understanding the complex interplay between gender, power, and decision-making.

Empowering women to exercise agency in family planning decisions, irrespective of societal expectations, aligns with the goal of achieving gender equality. It involves challenging traditional gender roles and norms that may limit women's choices and opportunities.

Highlighting the role of the mother-in-law as an influential figure in shaping family decisions emphasizes the need to address intergenerational dynamics and promote positive attitudes towards gender equality within families.

The narratives discussed through the lenses of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Power Discourse contribute to advancing the SDGs of Good Health and Well-being, Reduced Inequalities, and Gender Equality by addressing women's autonomy and health issues and challenging societal norms and expectations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study comprehensively explores the reproductive decision-making experiences of educated and employed women in Pakistan, framed through Dorothy Smith's standpoint theory. The nuanced narratives surrounding the number of children, the spacing between them, and sex selection reveal the intricate interplay between individual agency and societal structures.

The theme of decisions regarding the number of children serves as a manifestation of women's agency and empowerment, challenging societal norms and familial expectations. This aligns with standpoint theory, which asserts that social positions shape individuals' perspectives.

Title: *Educated Women's Reproductive Decision-Making in Pakistan – A Standpoint Analysis*

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Examining power dynamics among educated women highlights a notable shift where highly educated and economically independent women actively participate in family planning decisions. The influence of the gender of the first child and support from the mother-in-law emerges as crucial factors shaping women's autonomy, further reflecting the changing decision-making landscape within families with standpoint theory's recognition of individuals as essential stakeholders for shaping and transforming societal structures.

The aspect of decisions regarding sex selection reveals the deeply ingrained societal preference for male offspring despite women's educational and economic achievements. This theme underscores the complex negotiation between personal beliefs and familial expectations, echoing standpoint theory's acknowledgment of the intricate interplay between individual perspectives and societal biases. The study emphasizes the need for societal transformation to break free from gender biases and empower women to align their decisions with their values and aspirations, in line

with standpoint theory's call for recognizing and challenging prevailing societal structures.

The analysis of decision-making over the duration of marriage traces women's transformative journey in gaining autonomy, aligning with standpoint theory's emphasis on the evolving nature of individuals' perspectives within social relationships.

In essence, this research contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of reproductive decision-making among educated women in Pakistan, providing a rich tapestry of experiences through the lens of standpoint theory. It emphasizes the ongoing transformation of gender dynamics within families and the intricate interplay between individual agency and societal expectations. It reinforces the importance of continued efforts toward gender equality and empowerment in shaping a more inclusive and supportive environment for women's reproductive choices in Pakistan.

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