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Intra-Familial Coercive Control and Violence Experienced by Unmarried Adult Women in Jhang, Pakistan

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Abstract

The issue of violence against unmarried women in their natal households is under-researched, as research on domestic violence in Pakistan has mostly been conducted on married women and intimate partners. The present study aimed to examine the experience and interpretation of intra-familial violence among unmarried adult women in Jhang, Punjab, and the impact of gendered family authority on the consequences, coping responses, and help-seeking strategies in relation to intra-familial violence. A phenomenologically informed qualitative design was used. Fifteen unmarried women aged 18 years or older were recruited from the community in Jhang using purposive and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The data were analyzed manually using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Five interrelated themes emerged: violence as a form of familial discipline; verbal and psychological control through honor; economic deprivation and limited options for women; violations of sexual boundaries and enforced silence; and psychological effects and survival strategies. Participants associated these experiences with chronic fear, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, emotional suppression, and dependency. The results show that intra-familial violence against unmarried women can be an interconnected pattern of coercive control, which is justified by discourses of discipline, protection, obedience, and family honor. Violence-prevention policies and services in Pakistan should therefore extend beyond intimate-partner violence and explicitly recognize unmarried women who experience abuse within natal and extended-family networks.

Keywords: coercive control, family violence, family honor, natal household, domestic violence, unmarried women

Introduction

Domestic violence is a significant breach of women's safety, dignity, autonomy and human rights. Domestic violence may include physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse occurring within intimate or other family relationships (Ahinkorah et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2009; Ali et al., 2021). This can include threatening, intimidating, humiliating, restricting freedom of movement, depriving of financial resources, unwanted sexual contact or threats of physical harm or withdrawal of support. The impact of its effects is not limited to physical injuries and can damage the psychological health, social relationships, decision-making ability, self-esteem and sense of identity of women (Rabbani et al., 2008; Sattar, 2020; Sultan, 2016; World Health Organization [WHO], 2013).

For the purpose of the present study, intra-familial violence is defined as physical, verbal, psychological, sexual or economic abuse of an unmarried adult woman by a family

member or relative who exercises authority within, or is closely connected to, the woman's natal household. This definition is specific to intra-familial violence but acknowledges that abuse can happen in multiple family relationships. Coercive control is a descriptive term for a series of interconnected practices that limit women's autonomy, mobility, relationships, access to resources, personal decisions and capacity to seek help.

Physical violence has been the focus of research and public discussion for a long time, as its effects are more readily seen. Non-physical abuse, however, can be ongoing, long-term and just as harmful. Verbal degradation, emotional manipulation, economic deprivation, social isolation, and sexual boundary violations can lead to women feeling insecure, dependent and unable to have a meaningful say in their lives (Ahinkorah et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2009; Ali et al., 2021). It is important to consider intra-familial violence not as a series of isolated incidents. It can also be an overarching dynamic that sustains unequal power, dependency and compliance in family relationships.

Violence against women in Pakistan is deeply rooted in the familial, cultural and institutional settings. Abuse is often treated as a private family issue and not as a violation that needs to be addressed by law, social or public-health services (Hadi, 2017; Madhani et al., 2017; Rabbani et al., 2008). This privatization of violence could also help to underreport and limit women's access to protection, especially when disclosure poses a risk to family unity, social respectability, or honor. Women's expectations of obedience, patience, modesty, and family honor may also be a barrier to identifying and reporting non-physical abuse. Emotional humiliation, controlling behavior, limiting movement, and economic deprivation may then be considered normal means of asserting family power and not as forms of violence (Ali et al., 2021).

Women's behavior can be regulated even before marriage. In a patriarchal family system, fathers, brothers, and other senior males may be given more decision-making power, whereas females are expected to be subservient, modest, patient, and selfless (Hamid et al., 2010; Khan & Sajid, 2011; Niaz, 2004). These expectations may influence decisions concerning unmarried women's education, employment, movement, friendships, communication, clothing, and marriage. Resistance can mean disobedience or action that can hurt family honor. Restrictive or violent practices may then be considered as discipline, protection, correction or family responsibility, but not as abuse.

Direct and less obvious forms of violence and coercion can be used to control unmarried women. Women's autonomy can be constrained through a combination of physical assault, verbal humiliation, psychological intimidation, monitoring, withdrawal of financial support, interruption of education, restriction of employment and pressure around marriage options. These practices show that violence within the family is not limited to acts of physical violence, but can also be a form of systematic control of women's options, relationships and futures.

This control can be exacerbated by economic dependency. Limiting access to education, vocational training, work, property, or income may limit an unmarried woman's ability to protect herself, to leave an unsafe home, and to reach out to others for help. This economic disadvantage can thus lead to long-term dependency and limited decision-making. Emotional manipulation can also help to reinforce women's subordinate role in the family. The narratives about the burden or liability of an unmarried woman, or about her shamefulness, can lead to feelings of guilt, low self-esteem, anxiety, and fear of rejection.

The threat of expulsion, withdrawal of financial support, or damage to reputation may be additional reasons for not disclosing.

The majority of the studies conducted in Pakistan on domestic violence have focused on married women and domestic violence committed by husbands or intimate partners (Ali et al., 2011; Ali et al., 2021; Rabbani et al., 2008; Sultan, 2016). While this literature has helped to advance knowledge of IPV, it has tended to focus on violence perpetrated by husbands, and violence experienced by unmarried adult women in natal-family contexts has received relatively little attention.

This gap is not merely one of population representation. Violence against unmarried women may be organized and justified through forms of authority that differ from those operating within marriage. Fathers, brothers and other relatives can have control, through culturally embedded stories about discipline, protection, honor, respectability, economic burden and preparation for marriage. Theories that have been built to account for marital violence may not be adequate to account for the dynamics of coercion in natal-family violence.

Unmarried women can be beaten, verbally mistreated, psychologically intimidated, prevented from getting an education, from traveling, from earning money, forced to submit to sexual advances by relatives, or threatened to be disgraced or forced to follow family decisions. These practices are often socially invisible and institutionally underreported when they are presented as family discipline and/or family protection. Understanding the meaning of these experiences for unmarried women is essential to understanding the normalization of abuse, the timing of the shift from family to formal help-seeking, and why women may choose not to report or seek formal assistance.

Studies on violence against women have been conducted in the past and have tended to focus on quantitative surveys of prevalence, correlates and risk factors. Such studies are necessary for determining the extent of violence, but they do not necessarily account for how unmarried women perceive family authority, reputational pressure, how they negotiate restrictions, and how they make decisions about resistance, silence, compliance and seeking help. A qualitative approach is therefore suitable as it provides the opportunity to explore the meaning of violence and the social context in which women respond to violence in detail.

Qualitative inquiry can also provide insights into the interplay of seemingly independent modalities of abuse. Limits on schooling or work can lead to economic dependence, threats to reputation can lead to silence, and psychological intimidation can lead to compliance without repeated physical force. Honor, shame, obedience, dependency, and “sabr” are thus concepts that can influence women's experiences of violence and their responses to it, including how they survive, resist, disclose, or seek help.

Although there is increasing literature on violence against women in Pakistan, little has been written about the experiences and interpretations of intra-familial violence by unmarried adult women in their natal households. In particular, there has been a lack of focus on the interaction between gendered family authority and family honor-based expectations, economic dependence and reputational risks, which limit women's autonomy and influence in how they react to abuse.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the experience and interpretation of intra-familial violence among unmarried adult women in Jhang, Punjab, and

how their gendered family authority influences their reactions to violence. The study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do unmarried adult women experience and interpret intra-familial violence within their natal households?
2. What psychological and social consequences do women associate with these experiences?
3. How do unmarried women cope with intra-familial violence and navigate formal and informal sources of support?

Method

Participants and Setting

The study employed a phenomenologically informed qualitative design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that explored the lived experience, interpretation and meaning-making of intra-familial violence by unmarried adult women. This design was suitable as the study was concerned with participants' subjective experiences of abuse, its psychological and social implications, and the meanings of family authority, honor, dependency, coping, and help-seeking. The study was carried out in Jhang District, Punjab, Pakistan in 2025. The participants were recruited from the community in Jhang.

The final sample consisted of 15 unmarried adult women. Initial participants were recruited through community contacts who circulated information about the study. Interested women contacted the researcher directly, after which snowball sampling was used to identify additional eligible participants. Confidentiality was observed in the handling of referrals to avoid the sharing of information about possible participants without their consent.

Women were eligible to participate if they were 18 years of age or older, unmarried at the time of interview and had suffered from at least one of the following types of abuse: physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, or economic abuse by a family member or relative who had authority over or was closely connected to the family in the natal household. Participants also had to be able to give informed consent and be willing to discuss their experiences on a voluntary basis. Women under 18, previously married women and women who were not able to give informed consent were excluded.

The sample size was deemed to be adequate as the study focused on a specific phenomenon within a relatively homogeneous group of participants. The interviews generated sufficiently rich accounts to support an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon based on the experiences of the participants and patterned meanings that emerged throughout the data set.

Data Collection and Procedure

Individual semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. The interview guide started with demographic questions about the participants' age, education, employment, income, household composition, and relationship with the person who was responsible for the abuse. The substantive questions covered physical, verbal, psychological, sexual and economic intra-familial violence.

Physical violence questions included assault, restraint and threats of physical harm. Psychological and verbal violence questions included intimidation, humiliation, emotional manipulation, isolation, insults, accusations and reputational threats. Questions about sexual violence included: unwanted sexual contact, sexualized comments, coercion, victim blaming, and responses to disclosure. Economic violence questions discussed were related to

limitations in education, employment, personal income, property, and financial resources. Participants were also asked to explain their experiences and the impact of abuse on their psychological and social health and how they responded to or sought help for violence.

The semi-structured approach allowed the interviewer to ask open-ended questions, use probes and elicit the participant's own words to explain their experiences and meanings. The interview guide was pretested with three unmarried women to evaluate its clarity, cultural relevance, emotional sensitivity, wording and sequence. Selected questions were modified in order and wording based on feedback from the pilot interviews. These revisions did not alter the content of the guide but the three pilot interviews were part of the final data set.

The researcher informed the participants of the purpose of the study, the sensitive nature of the questions, confidentiality, and that participation in the study was voluntary before each interview. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview.

Interviews were held in Urdu in private and secure settings and were conducted one-on-one and lasted around 45-60 minutes. The participants were told that they were free to refuse any question, stop the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded. The researcher kept field notes and a reflexive journal to record contextual information, non-verbal reactions, methodological choices, personal suppositions, and initial interpretations.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Urdu and then translated into English. Special care was taken to maintain the cultural meanings of culturally specific expressions of *sabr*, honor, shame, discipline, obedience and family reputation. The audio-recordings, transcripts, consent forms, field notes, and analytical records were kept in password-protected files that were accessible to the research team only. The translations were checked against the original Urdu transcripts and audio recordings to ensure semantic accuracy.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis was used for manual analysis of the interviews in the phenomenological orientation of the study. This analytical technique allowed the researcher to focus on the patterned meanings that were found within the participants' narratives, while maintaining attention on the ways in which women experienced and made sense of intra-familial violence. No qualitative data-analysis software was used.

The analysis was conducted in six recursive phases as described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, initial coding, development of candidate themes, revision of themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the analysis narrative. These phases were not considered to be a linear progression. The researcher oscillated between the individual transcripts, coded extracts, candidate themes, field notes, and the entire data set during the analysis.

Each transcript was read multiple times by the researcher to gain familiarity with each account and the overall dataset. Initial observations concerning experiences, emotions, meanings, and contextual conditions were documented in field notes and a reflexive journal. The meaningful extracts were then identified, and descriptive and interpretive codes were assigned. A manual coding table was used to organize participant identifiers, data extracts, initial codes, preliminary categories, and analytical reflections.

The general categories of violence covered in the interview guide (physical, verbal, psychological, sexual and economic abuse) were used as sensitizing concepts, rather than fixed themes. Coding also addressed the meaning assigned to family authority, discipline, honor, dependency, reputational threats, psychological effects, coping and help-seeking.

Codes were related within and across participants' accounts and grouped together to form candidate themes that represented more general patterns of meaning. Coded extracts and the full data set were used to evaluate candidate themes for coherence, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research questions. These themes were then further developed, clarified, and given names based on the organizing ideas of each theme.

Less common, contradictory and contextually distinctive accounts were kept when they added to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher kept a record of coding decisions and revisions made while developing themes. Discussions of interpretations within the research team challenged assumptions, explored alternative interpretations, and deepened analysis. These discussions helped to ensure reflexivity and were not employed for the purpose of determining inter-coder reliability or a single objectively correct interpretation.

Figure

Author-Developed Representation of Braun and Clarke's Six Recursive Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis



Note. The phases are recursive rather than strictly linear. Developed by the authors based on Braun and Clarke (2006).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Field notes, analytical memos, and reflexive journal were kept during data collection and analysis to increase the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency of the study. These records allowed the researcher to look at the influence of personal assumption, interaction with participants, and institutional contexts on data generation and interpretation.

A progression from initial codes to preliminary categories, to candidate themes and the thematic structure was documented in an audit trail. Selected participants were provided with preliminary interpretations to determine if the analysis was a reasonable representation of their experiences. The contextual meanings were clarified and interpretations were refined

through participant feedback, but not in order to create an objectively correct account. A detailed description of the setting, participants, recruitment, and family contexts were included to aid readers' evaluation of transferability.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Jhang before data collection commenced. All participants gave written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that declining or withdrawing from the study would not result in any penalty. Participant codes were used, rather than names, and identifying information was deleted from transcripts and reported quotations.

Interviews were only conducted when privacy and participant safety were assured. Participants were able to refuse to answer any question, to stop the interview or to stop answering if they felt uncomfortable or distressed. If further support was needed, participants were referred to counseling, legal, medical, shelter or protection services. All research material was kept in a secure place and treated as confidential.

Results

Table 1.

Characteristics of the Participants

Characteristic	Category	n
Age	18–25 years	10
	26–35 years	4
	36 years and above	1
Education	No formal education	4
	Primary/Middle	7
	Secondary/Higher	4
Socioeconomic status	Low income	12
	Middle income	3
Primary male authority figure	Father	13
	Brother	2

Note. n = number of participants

The final sample included 15 unmarried adult women. Ten participants were aged 18–25 years, four were aged 26–35 years, and one was older than 35 years. Four participants had no formal education, seven participants had primary or middle education and four participants had secondary or higher education. Twelve participants were from low-income households and three were from middle-income households. The father was the primary male authority figure for 13 participants, while a brother was identified by two participants.

Table 2.*Themes, Organizing Concepts, and Subthemes Derived From the Analysis*

Theme	Central organizing concept	Illustrative subthemes
Violence framed as familial discipline	Physical aggression was justified as correction and enforcement of obedience	Slapping, hitting, restraint, threats, public punishment
Honor-based verbal and psychological control	Shame, intimidation, and reputational threats regulated women's behavior	Humiliation, burden narratives, expulsion threats, character accusations
Gendered deprivation	Restricted resources and opportunities maintained dependency	Educational restriction, forced labor, unequal resources, control of earnings
Sexual violations and silence	Sexual abuse was intensified by disbelief, victim-blaming, and reputational fear	Unwanted touching, coercion, dismissal of disclosure, blame
Psychological consequences and survival-oriented responses	Women managed chronic fear through constrained coping strategies	Anxiety, low self-worth, silence, compliance, religious coping, delayed help-seeking

Analysis resulted in five interrelated themes: violence as a form of family discipline; honor-based verbal and psychological control; gendered economic deprivation; violations of sexual boundaries and enforced silence; and psychological effects and survival-oriented responses.

Theme 1: Violence as Family Discipline

Physical violence was mentioned as a common way in which fathers and brothers would enforce women's obedience. Slapping, hitting, punching, pushing, dragging, hair pulling and throwing women against walls or furniture were reported acts of violence. There were also reports of threats with sticks and belts. These acts were not considered abuse but were often seen as correction or discipline in the home. Violence framed as discipline was reported across multiple participants' accounts. One participant described how physical assault was the response to perceptions of disrespect:

"My father slapped me whenever he thought that I was being disrespectful." (P04)

Restriction of participants' movements was also an effective control. One woman recalled:

"Just because I wanted to visit my friend, my father dragged me by the hair." (P11)

When violence was threatened, compliance was reinforced even if violence did not occur immediately:

"My dad was holding a stick and he told me that he would beat me if I didn't listen to him." (P02)

In some cases, violence was perpetrated in view of other family members making it even more disciplinary and humiliating:

"My dad beat me in front of everybody to teach me a lesson." (P13)

These accounts indicate that physical violence was not merely an impulsive reaction to conflict. It existed in a larger system of gendered power and authority, where male family

members established rules of submission and handed out discipline for women who were seen as having transgressed family norms.

Theme 2: Honor-Based Verbal and Psychological Control

The accounts of the participants were characterized by a high level of verbal aggression. Shouting, intimidating tones, vulgar language, insults, accusations and threats of punishment were described by women. Verbal aggression was employed by fathers and brothers to stifle dissent and assert their dominance in the family.

The threat of expulsion or withdrawal of financial support was especially effective as unmarried women were frequently reliant on the natal family for housing and material security. One participant described being publicly reprimanded:

“Just because I came home late, my father yelled at me in front of everyone.” (P07)

The insults were often directed at the participants' looks, skills, prospects of marriage, or perceived disobedience. One woman said she was made a burden:

“My brother said that I looked stupid and that nobody would want to marry me and that I was a burden.” (P15)

Another reason for control was family honor. The participants were held responsible for actions that could harm the family's reputation:

“Even when I disagreed with my father, he said that I had brought shame to the family.” (P01)

Women's access to shelter and support was also threatened:

“If I don't obey, my dad said he would throw me out of the house.” (P05)

Emotional blackmail, character-based accusations, intimidation, social exclusion and disbelief of women who reported abuse reinforced these practices. To be described as a burden, and to be threatened with dishonor or expulsion, was a form of psychological control which could be used to achieve compliance without constant physical force. Participants also reported being ridiculed, silenced and considered morally questionable. One woman stated:

“My appearance was always ridiculed, and I was always told that I was embarrassing the family.” (P09)

Another said the impact of collective silence was:

“Everyone saw what was happening, but they chose to stay silent and didn't acknowledge it.” (P12)

The fear of family dishonor thus served as a social expectation and also as a tool to discourage resistance and disclosure.

Theme 3: Gendered Economic Deprivation and Constrained Futures

Economic violence was felt in terms of limitations on education, vocational training, employment, savings, personal possessions, and access to basic resources. Participants also reported that they had to provide labor or income, but their brothers had priority in education and household resources. For some participants, restrictions on education directly limited their future independence:

“My father did not send me to school after sixth grade, but my brothers studied in good schools.” (P06)

Others were required to work without retaining control over their earnings:

“My family forced me to work in people's houses, but my father took all my hard-earned money.” (P14)

There was also a gender difference in the sharing of clothing and household supplies:

“My brother was always getting new things, I had to borrow even my everyday clothes from cousins.” (P03)

Often the financial needs of the participants were seen as an indication that they were a burden on the family:

“Every time I asked for something, they treated me as if I were a burden and told me that I should be thankful because girls are expensive.” (P10)

The accounts indicate that economic violence went beyond the denial of money. Limits to education, training, employment, property, and control over earnings limited future opportunities for participants and perpetuated long-term dependency on the same forms of family structure that led to abuse.

Theme 4: Sexual Boundary Violations and Enforced Silence

The participants reported unwanted touching by family members, coercive behavior by older male family members, sexualized comments, manipulative threats and pressure to comply with unwanted sexual demands. Often, when disclosure was made, it was followed by dismissal, disbelief, threats to reputation, or victim-blaming. One participant described an incident involving a relative:

“My cousin made me feel uncomfortable by touching me inappropriately, but I could not shout.” (P08)

The lack of protest was not only due to the momentary fear, but also due to the fear of what would happen if they were discovered. Participants worried that they would be blamed, disbelieved, or accused of damaging the family’s reputation. One woman described how a relative responded when she sought help:

“My aunt told me that I must have misunderstood when I told her about it.” (P11)

Other participants were questioned about their own behavior or presence at the location of the incident:

“They asked me why I had gone there if I was not looking for trouble.” (P02)

A family environment in which disclosure generated further humiliation intensified the harm associated with sexual violence. Reputational control, disbelief and the expectation that women should maintain family relationships in spite of the risk of harm were used to silence them.

Theme 5: Psychological Consequences and Survival-Oriented Responses

Participants linked intra-familial violence to ongoing anxiety, chronic fear, emotional suppression, guilt, low self-worth, lack of confidence, and difficulty making independent decisions. The fear of family dishonor and social judgment was particularly strong. Women reported watching themselves and keeping quiet to prevent further violence, expulsion or damage to the family's reputation. One participant described the pressure of reputation:

“I do not talk to anybody. I mostly keep quiet because, if I speak, the neighbors will say that I am the one who brought shame to my father’s name. The fear of what people will say is heavier than the pain of the beatings.” (P05)

Participants' sense of personal worth was also negatively impacted by repeated burden narratives:

“They told me that I was a burden, and each time I asked for something, they made me feel as though I was taking from my brothers.” (P13)

These stories illustrate that the impact of violence extended beyond immediate fear and distress. Messages that were internalized by participants included that they were a burden, could not make decisions on their own, or were responsible for upholding family honor.

Participants responded to the situation in a variety of ways, including silence, compliance, avoidance, religious coping, and delayed help-seeking. These responses should not be seen as “passive coping.” When there was no other option and financial necessity, silence and compliance were sometimes a rational means of avoiding escalation. One woman described compliance as a means of maintaining temporary safety:

“To keep the environment peaceful at home, I learned to say ‘yes’ to everything my brother said, even when he was wrong.” (P09)

Faith was a source of emotional support when participants felt there was little external support:

“When the world turned against me, I would turn to Allah because it was the only thing that kept me from losing my mind.” (P15)

Generally, formal assistance was sought only when violence was more serious. Participants were worried about losing family relationships, social identity, financial support, or future marriage opportunities if they left the family home. The ability to seek help was thus limited by the same systems of dependency and reputation that enabled abuse to occur.

Thematic Synthesis

Across the five themes, intra-familial violence operated as an interconnected system of coercive control rather than as a series of isolated incidents. Physical punishment ensured obedience, verbal and psychological abuse ensured behavior was controlled by honor and shame, economic restrictions ensured dependency, and family responses ensured that disclosures of sexual violence were silenced. Participants' coping strategies were constrained by the possibility of resistance resulting in additional violence, loss of support, expulsion or stigma.

Discussion

This study examined the nature and meaning of intra-familial violence experienced by unmarried adult women in their natal families in Jhang. The results showed that physical, verbal, psychological, sexual and economic abuse were not perceived as distinct occurrences. Rather, they worked together in a more diffuse system of gendered authority, monitoring, dependency, and discipline. This interpretation aligns with the notion of “coercive control”, which focuses on patterns of behavior that limit a person's autonomy, resources, movement, and personal decision-making (Stark, 2007). However, most qualitative research in Pakistan has examined coercion within marriage, leaving its operation in unmarried women's natal households comparatively underexamined (Ali, Farhan, & Ayub, 2020).

Physical violence was frequently reported as a “just” punishment for disobedience. Participants reported threats with household items, restraint, hair pulling, pushing, hitting, and slapping. These acts were often interpreted as disciplinary acts rather than acts of abuse. Previous qualitative studies in Pakistan have also revealed that violence can become a normal part of family life, and that it can be perceived as a legitimate way of disciplining women (Ali, Krantz, & Mogren, 2012). A similar study from Southern Punjab also revealed that the violence was legitimized based on the gender norms of women's obedience, male authority, and women's role in maintaining household order (Sattar, Ahmad, & Asim, 2022). While the studies mentioned above were conducted mainly with married women, the present results suggest that disciplinary violence can start before marriage and that it can be perpetrated by fathers, brothers, and other relatives.

The results are very similar to the qualitative study conducted by Hamid, Johansson and Rubenson (2010) in Islamabad with young women, in which the main theme was “security lies in obedience”. They reported that their participants talked about being socialized into being submissive and having limited authority over decisions about marriage and reproductive futures. The current research builds on that understanding by demonstrating that obedience may be encouraged by physical punishment, threats, verbal degradation, and economic restrictions. Obedience was not a freely adopted cultural value, but rather was associated with personal safety and the maintenance of family support in abusive situations.

Violence, both verbal and psychological, was also a key aspect of the maintenance of family authority. Shouting, insults, humiliation, accusations, mocking, character-based criticism, and threats of expulsion or withdrawal of support were described by the participants. These practices conveyed that women had limited power and that dissent was disrespectful. Ali et al. (2022) have reported in-depth gender discrimination in education, employment, health, mobility, family decision-making, and access to resources across three provinces of Pakistan. The present study also finds that these inequalities can be reproduced socially as well as by direct intimidation and psychological punishment in the home.

One of the most significant forms of control was family honor. Participants were cautioned that their independent actions, disagreement, or reporting of abuse would harm the family's reputation. Honor was thus a regulatory discourse that monitored women's movement, speech, relationships, and choices. Honor, the private nature of violence, and fear of escalation are found to be significant factors for women's silence by the community stakeholders in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2020). At the opposite end of this spectrum, studies of honor killings in Pakistan have reported that husbands, brothers, and other close family members have been involved in acts of violence based on the perceived harm to the family's honor (Nasrullah, Haqqi, & Cummings, 2009). The present study does not compare participants' experiences with honor killing; however, it shows how the same language of shame and reputation can be at work in everyday coercion.

The portrayal of unmarried women as an economic and social burden represented another mechanism of psychological control. Participants described being reminded that their education, clothing, daily needs, and future marriage imposed financial costs on the family. These messages led to feelings of guilt, low self-esteem and lack of entitlement to household resources. Studies in Pakistan have also shown that women face gender discrimination in access to education, employment, healthcare, inheritance, mobility and decision-making in the family (Ali et al., 2022). The current study builds on this evidence by demonstrating that the burden narrative can be used as a form of emotional manipulation. Women were denied opportunities that could help them to be independent and were then blamed for being dependent on their families.

This psychological control was strongly linked to economic deprivation. Participants described restrictions on education, vocational training, employment, income, savings, property, and access to basic resources. Economic abuse is defined as any action that disrupts a person's capacity to access, manage or control economic resources (Postmus et al., 2020). While the concept has been used mainly in the context of Intimate-partner relationships, the results of the present study show that fathers, brothers, and other natal-family members can be involved in economic abuse. Families limited women's access to education and employment, and thus their ability to become economically independent.

The results also suggest that economic control had a prospective aspect. Denial of education, skills training and employment opportunities restricted participants' capacity to build the resources to escape an unsafe home or to challenge family decisions that are harmful. Studies on South Asian women have revealed that economic abuse can manifest in various forms such as restrictions on access to resources, exploitation of women's labor, control over income and the ability to secure financial futures (Chowbey, 2017). Economic abuse has also been linked to dependency, psychological distress, financial hardship, and decreased capacity to leave an abusive situation (Johnson et al., 2022). The unequal distribution of resources among sons and daughters in the current study implies that the gender disparity was linked to a larger gender order in which investment in sons was given preference and daughters were expected to sacrifice.

Another form of intra-familial violence was sexual boundary violation, which was a serious but often hidden aspect of the violence. The unwanted touching, sexualized comments, coercive behavior, manipulative threats, and inappropriate conduct by male relatives were described by participants. Qualitative studies conducted in Pakistan have also reported sexual exploitation in extended-family settings, and have highlighted that women may be reluctant to report sexual exploitation due to fear of stigma, blame and damage to family honor (Ali et al., 2012). The findings of the present study show that the abuse was just one component of the harm. Participants also expected that they would be disbelieved, that their reputation would be damaged, and that they would be blamed for their own actions in causing the incident.

Reactions of family members to disclosure often exacerbated participants' distress. Some women reported that their experiences were trivialized, misunderstood or blamed on their behavior. This can result in a second victimization, where women are not recognized, protected or emotionally supported. Shame, self-blame, fear of perpetrators, preservation of family unity, and uncertainty about professional help have been found to be barriers to disclosure of violence among women (Ahmad et al., 2009; Othman et al., 2014). A South Asian qualitative synthesis also identified that family pressure, reputational issues, lack of privacy, and concerns about meaningful support were often limiting factors for disclosure and help-seeking (Baloch et al., 2025). In the present study, the silence surrounding sexual abuse was thus mediated by the interplay of family honor, victim-blaming, dependency and fear of social repercussions.

The psychological impact of intra-familial violence was cumulative and did not just relate to reactions to individual incidents. Chronic fear, anxiety, emotional suppression, hypervigilance, reduced confidence, guilt and impaired decision-making were described by participants. These consequences were a result of the long-term effects of intimidation and uncertainty in the home. Violence against women has also been linked to depression, anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, social isolation and poor psychological health in Pakistan (Madhani et al., 2017; Niaz, 2004; Rabbani et al., 2008). The present results indicate that the threat of punishment, humiliation, or withdrawal of support may be psychologically harmful even if physical violence was not taking place.

The burden narrative and fear of family dishonor seemed to be particularly significant in participants' self-perceptions. Over time, messages about women being liabilities, disobedient, or causing family shame might become internalized. This led some participants to doubt their value and decision-making abilities. This internalization illustrates the way coercive control can be manifested in external restrictions and psychological mechanisms.

Women were not only threatened but also blamed, rejected, and subjected to reputational harm.

Participants responded to violence through silence, compliance, avoidance, religious coping, and delayed help-seeking. These responses should not be taken as passive or accepting. Silence and compliance might be strategic ways of avoiding escalation, in a world where women relied on their natal households for housing, income, identity, and security. Studies on women's reactions to violence in Pakistan have also revealed that women can cover up the violence, appease the perpetrator, change their behavior, find solace in religion, or seek institutional support only when the violence is too much to bear (Ali et al., 2012; Zakar et al., 2012).

The idea of “sabr” was especially significant in the accounts of the participants. It was used to describe patience, endurance, emotional restraint and faith in times of trouble. For some participants, religious coping offered emotional support and comfort when formal support was not available. But “sabr” does not mean acceptance of violence. In the current study, it frequently signified limited agency: women would try to maintain emotional balance in situations where overt opposition might lead to additional violence, expulsion, or withdrawal of assistance. Previous studies have also indicated that religious coping can be psychologically comforting, but can also occur in the context of structural barriers to safety and formal help-seeking (Zakar et al., 2012).

Formal help-seeking was generally considered only when violence became severe or unmanageable. Participants worried that they might face rejection by family, financial instability, social stigma, or be denied marriage prospects if they approached courts, shelters, hospitals or other institutions. Similarly, family pressure, lack of enforcement of protective laws, fear of further violence, and viewing abuse as a private matter have been cited as barriers by Pakistani community stakeholders (Ali, Karmaliani, et al., 2020). Delayed help-seeking should therefore not be interpreted as an absence of agency. It reflected decision-making under conditions in which every available option carried substantial social and material risks.

The results collectively show that intra-familial violence against unmarried women was a web of physical punishment, verbal abuse, psychological harassment, sexual silencing, economic dependency, and reputational control. The forms of abuse reinforced each other. Physical punishment ensured compliance, honor-based threats discouraged disclosure, economic sanctions meant that women had fewer choices, and psychological degradation meant that women did not have confidence in their ability to resist or seek help. This pattern can help to explain how intra-familial violence is not a series of isolated incidents, but is instead a form of coercive control.

The main contribution of this study is that it focuses on violence prior to marriage and in natal-family relationships. Previous studies in Pakistan have focused on husbands or intimate partners as perpetrators. The present findings indicate that gendered coercion can begin earlier in women's lives, in terms of controlling their education, mobility, work, relationships, resources, and family reputation. These experiences can impact women's psychological health, economic opportunities, and ability to be autonomous throughout the life course. The results thus contribute to the knowledge base on violence against women beyond the context of marriage and provide evidence of the importance of acknowledging fathers, brothers and other relatives as perpetrators.

These findings also have implications for policies and services in the area of violence prevention. Intra-familial violence is a threat to unmarried adult women, and should be

acknowledged by hospitals, shelters, courts, educational institutions and community organizations. Domestic violence is not solely committed by husbands or intimate partners and screening and referral procedures should not make this assumption. Support services should also address educational and economic dependency, offering confidential counseling, legal information, vocational training, employment assistance, temporary shelter and safe referral pathways. This can increase women's options and lessen their dependency on the family systems in which violence is perpetrated.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on a small purposively selected sample of 15 unmarried adult women in Jhang and should not be generalized to all unmarried women in Pakistan. Snowball sampling may have limited participant diversity, while the sensitive nature of intra-familial and sexual violence may have contributed to underreporting. Translation from Urdu into English may also have reduced some culturally specific meanings despite efforts to preserve participants' interpretations.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that unmarried adult women may experience interconnected physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and economic violence within their natal households. Such violence was frequently justified through narratives of discipline, protection, obedience, and family honor, while dependency and reputational threats constrained resistance and help-seeking. The findings extend domestic-violence research beyond intimate-partner relationships and highlight the need for policies and services that explicitly recognize unmarried women experiencing abuse from family members.

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