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Professional Women's Experience of Autonomy and Independence in Sindh-Pakistan

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

This chapter summarises the part of findings of my doctoral studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. In this case study, there are elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches; the former is the principal approach to this research while the latter works as complementary. Participants of the research were divided into two categories: academic and non-academic. Forty semi-structured interviews (20 from each category) and 100 survey questionnaire (50 from each category) were collected. This research argues that existing concepts of 'autonomy' and 'independence' may not be useful indices/indicators for measuring the social status or position of women in Sindhi society, due to variations in understanding or the meanings attributed to these concepts across the globe. Findings argue that these professional women perceived concepts of 'autonomy', 'independence' and 'individuality' categorically different than those of Westernised understandings. This research asserts that Sindhi society, similarly to that of Tamil society, emphasises social groups rather than individuals. Hence, 'collective identities' are the essence of Sindhi society; however, individuals find their autonomy, independence and individuality in the context of 'others', which means to be more responsible for group's interests.

Keywords: professional women, autonomy, independence, individualism, collectivism, patriarchy, economic capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital

1. Introduction

The chapter is the part of my doctoral thesis 'Professional Women's Perceptions & Experiences of Respectability, Social Status, and Autonomy: a Case Study of Women Employed at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh-Pakistan' submitted for the degree of Doctoral of Philosophy, School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex, UK in April 2016.

The thesis aimed at exploring the perceptions and experiences of professional women at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro-Pakistan (UoSJP), regarding their respectability and social status in the workplace and in the community. Additionally, the thesis elaborates on professional women's perceptions and experiences regarding their autonomy and independence, which they have supposedly achieved through their university education and gainful employment. The major contribution of the thesis is that it addresses the lack of feminist research on professional women in the context of the on-going debate over gender equality in Sindh, Pakistan, by using feminist standpoint theory and inter-sectionality as theoretical and analytical tools. The thesis claims that 'collectivity' is the social ethic or essence of Pakistani society, while 'individuality' has been socially and culturally dishonoured and/or disapproved. Therefore, these professional women, understanding and attributing meanings to these concepts in local context, observed their 'limited' or 'defined autonomy', which is influenced by many potential intersecting factors rather than their gender and/or patriarchy.

The discussion in this chapter significantly analyses the perceptions and experiences of women's autonomy, while considering the presumption that women's higher education and gainful employment raise the level of women's autonomy, independence and social status within the household, and in society in general. Thus, the chapter discusses the extent to which these professional women perceive themselves as being independent and autonomous within and outside of the household. Higher education and better employment of these women are used as exploratory variables, as higher education and employment have been studied as the key indicators for women's autonomy and status in gender studies, for example, Refs. [1–3]. Most studies on women's autonomy, empowerment and status in the context of South Asia are quantitative and have used interrelated items or indices to measure autonomy, for example, see Refs. [4–7]. In contrast to previous studies, this is a qualitative study, which does not focus on measuring autonomy, but captures professional women's perceptions and experiences of autonomy and independence, and the meaning they attach to these concepts from an ethnographic perspective.

2. Perception and Experience of Autonomy

Universally, there is not any agreed-upon standard for measuring women's autonomy as it is a multidimensional concept and perceived differently in various societies because of the variations in socio-political structure, socio-culture patterns, living standards, family patterns and economic well-being [8]. Most researchers have used similar or interrelated variables for measuring women's autonomy and empowerment, while ignoring the cultural specificity and the strong emotional and structural bonds between men and women [9]. Malhotra and Schuler report that most studies on gender development and women's empowerment or autonomy have used quantitative methodologies, and attention has been given to variables such as women's age, age differences between husband and wife, women's education and employment, and family patterns. Some studies, for example, Refs. [1, 10–12], consider women's empowerment as a multidimensional concept, and they study various dimensions such as women's role in decision making; women's physical mobility or social participation; women's access to and control over resources; and control over health and matters related to family

planning. Sridevi, studying the status of female postgraduate teachers in Chennai (India), identified five dimensions for measuring women's autonomy or empowerment, which are control over personal income; maintenance of family income; supporting the natal family; expenditure on education of children; and financial decisions about healthcare. Similarly, Jejeebhoy and Sathar, in their study on two neighbouring countries (India and Pakistan), used four dimensions to measure women's autonomy: economic decision-making ability; spatial mobility; freedom from threat; and control over economic resources.

The interview data reveal that the term 'autonomy' is a broad concept, which has been viewed differently amongst the research participants. The meaning these professional women attach to the concept of autonomy is categorically different from the one that originates from the West (particularly in the USA), which supports individualism. In the context of a collectivist society like Pakistan, where there is a central idea of the group's interest taking precedence over self-interest, these professional women value family interests over personal interests [13], and search for their autonomy, equality, independence and individuality within their groups (family and caste). In a South Asian context, the words *azad* ('free') or *mukhtiyar* ('independent') refer to having control or authority to act as a free agent, but when applied to women, their positive connotations change to negative ones, such as *besharm* ('immodest and shameless' [14]). In the South Asian context, *azadi* ('freedom') is negatively valued, being associated with 'loose women' rather than fulfilment [15]. These women used the word *zimmadar* ('responsible') to describe their being in a decision-making position. Thus, these professional women were reluctant to call themselves *azad* (free) or *mukhtiyar* (autonomous or independent); as Jeffery and Jeffery (p. 181) suggest, '...that which we may want to label 'autonomy' may not be valorised by women because it seems unattractive and frightening'.

Thus, the findings report that these professional women have autonomy, though of a type which is categorised as 'bounded autonomy' or 'limited autonomy'—such as access to financial resources. Because Sindhi society is collectivist, like other South Asian societies, and these professional women are aware of that, their personal interests are strongly vested in their families, and togetherness, interconnectedness or interdependency is viewed as a form of social insurance by these women [9]. For example, to some participants, having control over resources means that they are autonomous, even though they have limited freedom to physical mobility. On the other hand, others consider 'participation in decision-making processes' as their autonomy, though they may have little to control over economic resources. The variation in the perceptions of these professional women regarding their autonomy reveals the challenges faced when attempting to use the notion of women's autonomy to understand gendered structures and inequalities in the province of Sindh. There is variation in the conceptualisation of autonomy [7], and there is no universal notion of autonomy.

3. Decision-making Autonomy

Women's participation in decision making in general, and within the household in particular, is considered to be one of the potential indicators for measuring women's status, autonomy and empowerment in gender studies. Various research studies, for example, Refs. [6, 7], on wom-

en's autonomy in the context of Pakistan have employed participation in decision making as a major parameter to assess women's status and autonomy. Women's participation in decision-making processes—particularly in the household—has emerged as one of the key themes from the interview data. The interviews indicate that women's university education has woken them up to their rights, and they have asserted more involvement in household decision making.

This assertion is also supplemented by the survey data, which reveals that 86 and 80% of academic and non-academic respondents respectively are of the opinion that university education increases women's participation in household decision making. Seventy-six per cent and 80% of academic and non-academic respondents respectively thought that employment increases women's participation in household decisions. Interview participants shared that their higher education has brought about phenomenal changes in their lives by: enhancing their self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth; raising up their efficacy; providing better career opportunities; allowing for better upbringing of their children; enhancing their mobility; and raising their status and autonomy in the family and in society [3]. Employment has provided them with better status, and an autonomous position within the household, by reducing their economic dependency.

Findings suggest that higher education strengthens a person's skills and capacity, which further increases the chances of better-skilled and socially acceptable employment opportunities for women. Employment is seen to have a crucial role in increasing women's participation in decision making within the household, and in the community in general. However, the level of women's decision making and acceptance of decisions made is heterogeneous. Further, the qualitative analysis suggests that women's participation in decision-making processes can be affected by intersecting social categories such as women's age, marital status, family structure, caste, social class, ethnicity and residence.

3.1. Women's marital status and participation in household decisions

Past research in South Asia, for example, Refs. [16–18], particularly in the rural context of Pakistan [7], which found a woman's age had an influence on her autonomy; however, this study suggests the influence of women's marital status on their autonomy, particularly in household decision making. Results of the in-depth interviews have also found a variation in the perception of interviewees regarding their decision-making autonomy. Married women have greater decision-making autonomy in the household than unmarried women from the same social class or background. They experienced practices of mutual decision making within their households.

However, unmarried interviewees' experiences of participation in decision making within the family were different from those of married interviewees of the same social class background. They experienced less participation in household decision making than married women living either in joint or nuclear/semi-nuclear families. One reason for their lesser say or involvement in household decision making is the cultural notion that a woman's real home is her husband's home while she is a 'guest' in her parental family [19]. This type of cultural notion and women's socialisation may have influenced the personality of professional

women, and they prefer to keep themselves outside of parental family matters and decisions. Secondly, cultural preference of the son as the inheritor and the head of the family is the major reason behind daughters' lesser participation in parental family decisions. Culturally, the participation of women particularly—participation of daughters in family matters—is considered as going against the honour of the family—specifically, in rural areas. One of the unmarried non-academic interviewees shares:

It is true that I am not consulted in household decisions and I have no say in household decisions, because in our rural-based Sindhi family daughters are not involved in family matters; culturally, it is considered against the honour of the family. However, I am independent in my own decisions, as I am not married while my younger, uneducated sister got married as arranged by our parents. (Adele, 40, Coordinator)

The positive influence of Adele's cultural capital (higher educational qualifications and training) and economic capital (employment) on her decision-making abilities is witnessed in her above statement. She considers herself independent in her own decisions—for example, selection of life partner, choice of occupation and career development—but she complains that she is not consulted in her parental family decisions. However, the positive influence of women's cultural and economic capital on their participation in decision making depends upon other intersecting social factors—for example, women's marital status, parental family patterns, caste or *biradari* and rural background.

In contrast to married and unmarried participants, widows or separated women (either living with their parents or in separate houses) perceived themselves to be more autonomous in decision making. They are the sole decision makers in their respective families. A widow and mother of three, living with her parents, shares her experience:

I live with my elderly parents, and they are economically dependent on me. I am independent, and in fact, I am the head of my [parental] family. My elderly father (uneducated) always asks my mom to seek my opinion, as he thinks I [being university educated and working in the university] know things the better way. (Agnes, 35, Librarian Assistant)

The above quote reveals that a woman's cultural and economic capitals are stronger predictors of her autonomy and empowerment when she is largely responsible for the family's economic provisions. In such circumstances, gendered relations, culture, caste and social background have a lesser influence over her life, as Agnes considers herself not only independent but also head of the family. Poor women's caste (either higher or lower), converging with their poverty, forced them to work outside the home and enhanced their greater participation in decision making and mobility [9].

3.2. Women's family patterns and participation in household decisions

The impact of family structure (joint/extended, nuclear or semi-nuclear) on women's decision-making autonomy has been noticed in this study, similar to in the previous study [7] conducted in the rural context of Pakistan. The province of Sindh has witnessed a process of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, and substantial changes in economic and social development. As the studies have suggested, these substantial changes may have an important

impact on the family structure, gender relations within the household [20] and women's position in family income [21]. Similarly, impacts of the substantial changes brought about by economic and social development have been observed in the province of Sindh, where the nuclear and semi-nuclear family structure is emerging, and women's higher education and employment is being socially accepted and welcomed, though not on a wider scale [22].

Participants belonging to nuclear or semi-nuclear families are more likely to have higher levels of decision-making autonomy than those living in a joint family. Interview data seem to support the argument [22] that family patterns in urban Sindh have gone through a significant change, and women are participating in household decision making. On the other hand, it has been observed that these professional women accept that the final decision-making authority is the man. This type of acceptance reveals that these professional women have also internalised cultural and religious norms, which support man's being 'head of the family'. Sindhi society is predominantly male-dominated; hence, the notion of 'man as final authority' also exists in urban-based nuclear families, but in urban-based Sindhi middle-class families, decisions are made mutually, as one of the academic interviewees reflects:

As we are [an] urban-based family, and I think most decisions are [made] mutually in the urban based-educated family, my husband and I share everything—including family or our career—and then decide. Thus, our decisions are collective, and based on consultation, but man is the final authority in our society. (Christina, 45, Assistant Professor)

On the other hand, participants living in nuclear or semi-nuclear families, but with a legacy of a rural-patriarchal background based on extended kinship, caste and tribal settings, also have a say within their immediate families. However, they have no participation in major decisions-making and still have lesser recognition and acceptance in family decision making compared to their counterparts who belong to urban-based nuclear families. Further, the ability of women to take part in decision-making processes is dependent on the type of decision that is being made.

You know our [Sindhi] family structure is very complicated and extended. My husband is already married and she [his first wife] lives in his village with his parents' family, while I live here in Hyderabad. In our immediate family, we make all decisions with mutual consultation and understanding, and mostly I make decisions and he agrees. However, I am not hesitant to say that he is from a rural area and being the elder, he is the head of his parental joint family. So being the head, he does not share his parental family matters with me. (Kate, 55, Professor)

It is argued that Islam does not favour polygamy, and did not introduce the practice of polygamy [23]. Pakistan, being an Islamic country religiously and legally,¹ allows polygamy, and it has a cultural acceptance amongst Muslims. In spite of that, polygamy is not a common

¹Muslim Family Law Ordinance 1961 (MFLO), which regulates family matters, i.e. registration of marriage, divorce and polygamy, legally permits a Muslim man to keep more than one wife at a time. According to the MFLO, every marriage shall be registered, and husband must seek permission from his wife or wives before a second marriage, by giving application to the Chairman of Union Council. Upon receipt of the application, the Chairman shall ask the applicant and his wife or wives to each nominate a representative to establish the Arbitration Council. The Arbitration Council, if satisfied that the proposed marriage is necessary, grants the permission applied for marriage.

practice in the province of Sindh; however, it is seen that landlords, *Pirs*² [43] and politicians have more than one wife. A tendency to marry an educated professional woman as 'second wife' was also noticed in the Sindh middle class, whereby educated men—who were married to their illiterate cousin or close blood relative at a young age—prefer to marry an educated professional woman.

Kate's husband, belonging to Upper Sindh (Khairpur), also had a first marriage to his illiterate cousin, while his second marriage was to Kate, a woman who belongs to an educated family from Lower Sindh (Hyderabad). Hence, the couple has different familial, educational and regional backgrounds. Kate's experience of autonomy and status is complex. On the one hand, she exercises all powers within her immediate family,³ and outside as well, in addition to which, she owns a house and a car. On the other hand, she does not have any kind of participation in decision making with her in-laws. Such a wide level of difference in women's status is seen in those families whose first generation of men have obtained white-collar employment, and whose women have still not achieved entry into higher education and employment. Kate's experience reflects the influence of region and family patterns over women's status and autonomy [6].

Similarly, one of the academic participants, living in a nuclear family (but whose husband has a joint family back in the village), has perceived greater decision-making autonomy in her immediate family, but not equal to that of her husband. As she expresses:

I have an equal say in decision-making in my immediate family. We make all decisions mutually. I am consulted in family matters, I can suggest but I cannot decide. My husband asks me for the suggestion, sometimes he appreciates my suggestion and sometimes does not, but finally he makes all decisions. (Caroline, 42, Assistant Professor)

Caroline's perception of her equal say in household decision making suggests that her understanding of the concept 'equality' is that of 'limited-equality' or 'limited autonomy' [7]. She understood and attached meaning to the concept of equality in the context of her local culture, which stresses collectivity and togetherness, rather than in the Western sense of equality, in which the individual is judged against the notion of an independent, self-contained agent and valued equally in law, and in a dominant ethos that supports individualism [13]. Having consultation in family matters, to her, means 'equality' and equal say; however, she acknowledges that the final authority is her husband.⁴ The ultimate authority of man is a salient feature of traditional or patriarchal society, which defines women's role primarily within the arena of home as mothers and wives, and defines men as the breadwinners [24].

Kate's and Caroline's experiences of their decision-making autonomy reflect the influence of family structure and the legacy of a rural background, which is male-dominated, on these professional women's lives. However, a positive change has been seen in the family patterns

²In Pakistan, the term *Pir* is used for 'spiritual guide, Holy man and wielder of spiritual power and blessing' (Hassan and Kamal 2010), while its real meaning in Persian is 'old man' or 'respected elder'.

³She lives with her two unmarried children in the second largest city in the province of Sindh, while her husband has already a first wife who lives in village. Therefore, 'immediate family' refers to her and her two unmarried children.

⁴Caroline's parents were from Upper Sindh (Shikarpur) and migrated to Hyderabad, thus she was brought up in Hyderabad, the second largest city of Sindh, while her husband's family still lives in Shikarpur, Upper Sindh. Thus, the family patterns and norms of the couple's parental families are different, and have effects on their socialisation.

of Sindhi society, and women have involvement in household decisions and economic activities, though not to the same degree as their counterparts belonging to nuclear families, based in urban areas [22]. Thus, Kate's and Caroline's cultural and economic capitals have a significant impact on their decision-making abilities. They both—through living in harmony with others (the husband and his family), and accepting the man as the ultimate authority in the family—have strategically used their cultural and economic capitals for their maximum social security and mutuality in family decision making.

3.3. Women's ethnicity and participation in household decisions

It is also observed that ethnicity has a significant influence on women's participation in household decisions. *Muhajir* participants' perceptions of their participation in household decisions are very positive compared to either urban-based or rural-based Sindhi professional women. *Muhajir* participants' parents are educated and settled in urban areas; hence, they are encouraged to allow an education, as well as paid work, for their daughters. Second, *Muhajir* participants have no connection to feudal or tribal settings, as Sindhi participants have. Therefore, the family patterns and socio-cultural values of Urdu-speaking families are categorically different from Sindhi patterns and values in general, and from rural Sindhi areas in particular. An Urdu-speaking Assistant Professor, whose mother was a graduate but a housewife, expressed her role in family decisions/matters as follows:

I am consulted in all matters equally, we make all decisions with mutual consultation and understanding, and I do share my family planning matters with him [husband]. We are Muslims, and God has made man the head of household, so his decisions should be obeyed. To me, a woman should obey her husband, but it does not mean she becomes his slave or servant. (Isabella, 43, Assistant Professor)

The majority of the Urdu-speaking population is practicing Muslims, though supportive of women's education and employment. Isabella had a religious education,⁵ and religion has a significant influence on her life. Thus, through religious education, she has internalised religious norms such as 'man as head of the family', and women's modesty. Therefore, being moderate Muslims and professional women, they support the superior role of man as the head of the family and expect him to play the role of guardian and protector. The ideal behind complying with the decisions of elders and superiors is to achieve meaningful control over one's own life while living in harmony with family and others (caste) [13]. However, obeying the husband does not mean she should have a secondary position in the family but should be an equal partner or member of the family.

Thus, the middle-class based in urban areas supports women's education and employment; however, they have developed their own class norms, which determine women's boundaries. Thus, it has been observed that middle-class women internalise and manifest a male dominance ideology—status consciousness—though that differs from rural-based patriarchy, to a greater degree than for lower-class (working class) women for several reasons. One reason might be that elite and upper-middle-class men are able to meet the major economic needs of

⁵There is an increasing trend of religious education in the rich and middle classes. They do not send their children to Madrasahs but arrange private home-based tuition of religious education for their children.

their families. Second, in the perceptions of the elite and middle classes, higher education is valued for status achievement and improved matrimonial prospects, rather than for employment and the economic independence of women. Therefore, elite and upper-middle-class women engage themselves in only white-collar jobs as they are conditioned to be role models, and further, they transmit this ideology to the next generation. Upper-class women's engagement in high-ranking positions or decent occupations increases theirs, as well as the families', symbolic capital (status, prestige and power).

3.4. Modernity and mutual household decision making

In the urban areas of Pakistan, the joint family structure has begun to dissolve in recent years, and women's entry into higher-education and employment has increased. Further, the spread of modern technology, mass awareness, political and social movements for equal rights have played a significant role in creating egalitarian norms in the upper and middle classes. Besides, higher education and the employment of middle and upper-class women, who work for the sake of a career and for self-fulfilment [25], have created a sense of 'self' and independence amongst these women. These women, who are encouraged by their families in higher education and career development, and who are subject to fewer traditional restrictions, enjoy mutuality and equality in spousal communication, and most family decisions are made mutually; hence, they compete with men and exist with men. Women from such social class backgrounds have developed a sense of mutuality and equality in terms of gender relations within and outside of the home. One academic interviewee expresses her feelings about her participation in decision making:

We [spouses] both are faculty members in the same department. Neither he nor I [make] decisions individually; we do consult each other, hence, our decisions are mutual. (Barbara, 52, Associate Professor)

The above quote highlights the prevailing patterns of modernity, mutuality, equality and liberty in gendered relations among the highly educated and professional social classes. Mutual respect, reciprocal social relations and interdependency – particularly between spouses – are seen as the centrality of that social class. Further analysis of interviews suggests that younger men and women from higher social classes are the key force behind this ideational change, in which women are treated as 'partners', rather than as 'dependent entities' as they are in patriarchal structures [25].

Similarly, non-academic interviewees from such higher social class backgrounds have also observed mutuality in the decision-making practices in their families. Families with such higher social backgrounds also support their daughter-in-law in higher education and decent employment. Lisa, who has an urban background, married at a young age soon after completion of her Intermediate qualifications ('A Levels' in the UK), later graduated from university with the encouragement and support of her husband. Talking about her role in family decisions, she says:

After two years of marriage, my husband encouraged and supported me in having a university education, and I graduated in Sociology. I think higher-education gives confidence and enables a person to live a better life, but as far as decision-making is concerned, it depends

upon the background of the family and [the] socialisation of persons. I am consulted in family decisions and he [husband] mostly asks me for suggestion[s], so our decisions are mutual. (Lisa, 36, Computer Operator)

Lisa's story also reveals a greater change or a shift in the patterns and norms of educated urban-based Sindhi families, where newly married women are encouraged to go into higher education and employment, instead of being restricted to household chores/responsibilities [22, 25]. As both Lisa's parental family and in-laws are educated and settled in the second largest city of Sindh, she was encouraged to go through university education even after her marriage. She feels confident and more independent because of her university education and employment. She acknowledges that participation in family decision making depends on a person's socialisation and family background. This indicates that education and economic well-being enable and empower people, but factors like the background of one's family, and one's locality have a greater positive or negative impact on an individual's autonomy.

4. Economic Autonomy

Access to and control over resources is one of the most frequently used indicators (economic dimension) to measure women's autonomy, empowerment and status [26, 27]. Without a doubt, these professional women are in better employment and have considerable earnings; however, the question is whether they see themselves as having access to and control over financial resources, and the meanings they attach to this access and control.

The survey data reveal that 86% of academic and 90% of non-academic respondents have had access to and control over their own income and financial resources. Similarly, the majority of academic and non-academic interviewees experienced access to and control over their income and financial resources. However, only two of the married academic interviewees, who belonged to the middle class, have no control over their financial resources. As discussed above, family structure has a potential influence on women's autonomy and social status within and outside of the family. This study finds that family structure and class systems congruously affect women's perceptions of their autonomy. It is seen that women who belong to middle-class urban families, but are married to persons with a rural-based joint family background, have relatively lesser control over their income and resources. Caroline belongs to an urban-based, well-educated, middle-class family, but married a man from a village of Upper Sindh for love. She illustrates the aforementioned point:

I have a good job, handsome income, freedom of expression and participation in decisions and most of our decisions are mutual. However, I will say the final authority is he [husband] and I am dependent on him. Honestly speaking, I am more Eastern family-oriented and religious-minded, so I believe as well I want to see him as the head of [the] family. I fully support him, and he makes all family decisions. (Caroline, 42, Assistant Professor)

Caroline, belonging to an urban-based middle class, has internalised norms like women as 'role model' (bringing respect to the family) and 'man being head of the family', while her husband's roots in a rural, traditional family expect a woman to be a 'good woman/mother' (i.e. obedient and submissive to her husband). Thus, the convergence of middle class and

rural family structures might have influenced her self-confidence and self-esteem, which would ostensibly be raised by her higher education.

In the above quote, the emphasis placed on *'[being] Eastern family-oriented and religious-minded'* reflects the socialisation of girls in middle-class families. They are brought up in such a way that they pursue higher education and career development, but simultaneously they portray themselves as being submissive to male members of the family. They might have been taught in their families that to be 'Western and non-religious' is pejorative and brings dishonour to a woman and her family. Therefore, middle-class women have emphasised phrases such as *'family-oriented'*, *'Eastern woman'* and *'religious-oriented'* when sharing their perceptions of their social status and autonomy. Middle-class women's internalisation of these phrases manifests the prevalence of 'bargaining patriarchal' norms [28], wherein professional women (willingly or unwillingly) accept norms instead of challenging them, because there is a benefit to them later when they become senior 'mother-in-law'. Similarly, Christina, belonging to a middle-class family, shares:

I have control over my own income and property, but I am very much [a] 'family-oriented' person, so I do share all with my husband and also seek his suggestion in all family and career matters...I have my own car and house. (Christina, 45, Assistant Professor)

Interestingly, those who belonged to urban-based nuclear families but had a legacy of a rural, traditional family, and perceived comparatively lesser participation in family decisions, actually had greater economic autonomy. Kate, being the second wife and living separately from her husband's first wife and parental family, experienced greater decision-making autonomy in her immediate family, but no participation in decision making in her husband's parental family back in the village. By contrast, regarding her household decision-making autonomy, she experiences a greater economic autonomy, as she illustrates:

I have control over my income and property. I have my own house and a car... when I bought [the] car he [her husband] did not know it. I went with my brother-in-law and bought a car [...] then I bought a plot of land and constructed a house as I wished to. Simply, I said I have my own money, so it is up to me to decide the map of house [...] and of course his reply was YES. (Kate, 55, Professor)

Kate's quote reflects the changing of family patterns and overall social structure of Sindhi society, which is known as a male-dominated society [22]. This change has given social space and acceptance to a shift in women's defined roles within and outside of the family, such as allowing them access to education, work and economic independence. On the other hand, due to the strongest traditional legacy, which supports man's authoritative position in and outside of the family, men are reluctant to accept women's role from a broader socio-cultural perspective. This also manifests itself in that professional women have access to many financial advantages and physical mobility, but still have lesser individual recognition in the society, socially and culturally, because of socio-cultural factors such as patriarchy, the elite or upper-middle classes (symbolic capital: power, prestige) and caste norms [9]. As Hussain finds, even if a woman is highly educated and at a higher-ranking position, her primary duty is to be a good housewife and a good mother; if she fails to obtain a good reputation for being a good wife or mother, then she is considered a failure.

The majority of non-academic participants (most of who were from lower classes, except for a few working as computer programmers) have greater economic autonomy than the academic participants. None of the non-academic participants experienced having no control over her income and financial resources. Lower-class women (working in lower-ranking positions/labour work) have entered into employment because of their family's economic needs; hence, their economic contribution is recognised and appreciated within the family. The reason behind their having a greater economic autonomy than academic participants (rich or middle class) might be their contribution to the family's income. The interview findings also reveal that the majority of non-academic participants' families are living in rented housing. Hence, they prefer to save their income for buying their own house, as Lucy illustrates below:

I have control over my own income and financial resource[s]. However, I will say that my and his [husband] income is our combined income. We are living in a rented house, and we cannot afford to have own house. Therefore, we mutually have decided to save [the] maximum of my monthly salary for this purpose. (Lucy, 30, Librarian Assistant)

Unmarried non-academic participants experienced higher economic autonomy, and they contribute somehow to their parental families. Most of the parents of unmarried participants expect their daughters to save their income for a 'dowry' when they get married. 'Dowry' means the property given to the bride during the marriage rituals by her parents, or the property expected or even demanded by the husband and his family from the bride's family. It is argued that a high dowry amount enhances women's decision-making power, and decreases the likelihood of women's exposure to fatal domestic violence in the marital household [29]. Dowry practices—a common custom observed in South Asian countries, including Pakistan—have been extended, and the amount for a dowry seems to be increasing, particularly in the middle and emerging-middle classes of Pakistan [30]. Dowry is a custom of the upper-caste (Brahmins); therefore, the adaptation of upper-caste (rich and middle class in Pakistan) patterns of behaviour by lower castes (lower class) is employed as a means of acquiring higher social status in society, as reflected below:

I have control over my own income and resources. I want to contribute to [the] family but my father refuses, and says whatever you earn is only yours. My mother pushes me to save money for [a] dowry. I, being an elder sibling, support my younger sister and brother, who are students. (Pamela, 35, Computer Programmer)

Thus, it is concluded from the above discussion that the perceptions of academic participants about their economic autonomy are heterogeneous, though they experience greater economic autonomy compared to their autonomy in decision making. The influence of class has been witnessed in the perceptions of academic participants regarding their economic autonomy. On the one hand, middle-class women perceived themselves as being economically autonomous and having control over their income and financial resources. On the other hand, they consider themselves '*family-oriented*', '*Eastern woman*' and '*religious-oriented*', and so share and consult with their elder male family members [father/husband] and seek his advice. This might indicate that middle-class women have more monetary advantages, but comparatively lesser economic autonomy. It has been noted that the combination of rural family and middle class (i.e. husband from a rural family, and wife from urban-based middle class) has negatively

affected the economic autonomy of women. Non-academic women exercised comparatively more economic autonomy than the academic participants. Unmarried women are more economically independent and have control over their financial resources; however, their parents expect and ask them to save money for their dowry for the time of their marriage.

5. Autonomy of Physical Mobility

Various studies suggest the positive impact of a woman's education and employment on her social status and autonomy. Women's education is the measure most widely used for their relative status and autonomy [15]. Similarly, studies from Pakistan suggest that women's education is strongly associated with women's status and access to resources but is very weakly associated with their freedom of mobility [7]. The underlying assumption is that when women are unable to leave their homes, their sphere of activity is restricted to the home. However, the case of women in paid work—particularly in the higher-education sector, which is considered respectable and the most suitable for women [22, 31] in traditional societies like Pakistan—differs from this assumption, as these women do leave their homes for paid work, and contribute to the family's income. Moreover, women's education allows them to develop interpersonal skills and enhanced self-confidence and self-worth, which may lead towards better employment, greater control over financial resources and personal autonomy.

Many studies, for example, [11, 32], have used indices that were phrased in terms of whether women are permitted to go to or need permission to go to as set of place. Past studies—mostly quantitative—on women's autonomy in the rural context of Pakistan [6, 7] have also used similar indices to measure women's mobility. In this research, I also administered a survey questionnaire to collect responses from the research participants about their physical mobility. The survey data reveal that the majority of the respondents do not travel alone. Less than half of the participants—42% academic, and 44% non-academic—can travel alone within the city. Note that 44% of academic and 24% of non-academic participants can travel alone to another city, while 40% academic and 10% non-academic agreed that they could go abroad alone if they want. However, this study focuses on the subjective experiences of women; hence, by employing a qualitative approach, I have collected and interpreted the perceptions and experiences of professional women to understand the complexity and influence of intersectional social categories on women's freedom to physical mobility.

Interview findings reveal that academic and non-academic interviewees have greater freedom of physical mobility between cities, and in the city. Observations on the influence of marital status, family background and social class on women's freedom of mobility showed that they are free and do not seek permission; however, almost all interviewees inform elder members of the family—mostly husband or father—about their outside activities. In other words, it can be a strategy for women to keep their family members informed.

A few of the interviewees, belonging to rural families, and the rich/middle classes, shared that 'informing one's husband or father' is an indirect strategy to seek permission; however, none of them experienced refusal or denial. This strategy of 'informing' used by these professional

women reflects Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargains (strategies to accommodate and negotiate positions and roles). According to Kandiyoti, '...often, through choices of their own, they are working outside their homes and are thus "exposed"; they must now use every symbolic means at their disposal to signify that they continue to be worthy of protection' [28].

Elite and upper-middle class married women perceive themselves autonomous in their physical mobility; they are not forbidden to travel alone nor do they need to ask permission for travelling alone; however, they prefer to go with family members or with servants to show they are 'worthy of protection' using 'symbolic means' [28]. Academic women belong to the elite and the upper-middle classes, and in those classes, there is a culture of having servants (such as drivers, guards, cooks and house cleaners) and having such personnel becomes an identifying factor of the rich and middle classes in the province of Sindh. It is also observed that the majority of married academic interviewees have personal cars and have hired drivers for 'pick and drop' services. Reasons behind the hiring of a driver could include this being viewed as a symbol of 'social status' and established gender-related norms of the middle classes, which expect women to be a 'role model'. As Kandiyoti (p. 285) finds, 'patriarchal bargains do not merely inform women's rational choices, but also shape the more unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity.' One of the academic interviewees belonging to a rich class shares:

I can travel alone; there is no restriction from my husband and in-laws. I have visited many countries; even I lived about a year in America [USA]. Therefore, my husband has no objection regarding my physical mobility. Often, I come to the university with my husband, as he is also a professor there in the same department. However, in the case of his absence I take my driver with me; usually, I do not travel alone. (Charlotte, 45, Assistant Professor)

Most responses from married academic interviewees, belonging to the rich and the middle classes, were along the lines of 'yes, I can travel alone but I prefer to do so with family members or friends' or 'I don't need permission, but I do inform'. These phrases reflect the symbolic capital (power and prestige) and social status of the middle classes, and these women travelling alone may incur a loss of social prestige in the community and society, though their physical movement is more legitimate. Therefore, they prefer to travel with family, servants or friends within the city.

Interestingly, these women have significant physical mobility in being able to go abroad (knowledge autonomy: exposure to career development within and outside of the country), though they have lesser intra-city and inter-city physical mobility. Women's higher education, as cultural capital of the middle and rich classes, increases symbolic capital (power and prestige); hence, women are encouraged towards advanced education and career development training abroad, as reflected in the statement below:

Yes, I have complete freedom of physical or social movement. Currently, I am doing my PhD in the United Kingdom, and living there alone thousands [of] miles away from my family. My family has no objection. (Christina, 45, Assistant Professor)

By contrast, the majority of non-academics (belonging to lower and working classes) had a greater freedom of physical mobility, particularly within a city. However, they experienced

a limited or restricted physical mobility between cities. The reason for this could be a lack of financial resources, as well as the gendered norms of their families. Unlike married academic interviewees, married non-academic interviewees mostly go to the market with their female friends, and they inform their families, as reflected below:

I can travel and visit my family and friends alone, but for all that, I have to inform my husband; no need to get permission. I think keeping him informed is very important for smooth marital life, and same he does too [sic]. (Lisa, 36, Computer Operator)

Lisa, as well as her husband, informs each other about their outdoor activities, which shows the impact of modernisation on urban-based middle and working class families. As a result of modernisation, family patterns have begun to change, and they value egalitarian practices such as mutuality, togetherness and interdependence in spousal social relations. Both husband and wife are aware of the importance of harmonious marital relations.

It is seen that unmarried academic interviewees are likely to be more independent in terms of their physical mobility. There were four unmarried academic interviewees, out of 20. Interestingly, all of them had PhDs (two local and two foreign) and personal cars, but unlike married academic women, they drive the car themselves. One unmarried academic participant perceived her freedom of physical mobility thus:

I am an independent woman; I do not need to seek for any kind of permission, though I do keep my parents informed. I have my personal car, and I myself drive it instead of hiring a driver. I think it is all because of my parents: they have given me confidence, and it depends upon socialisation. Otherwise, I have seen many of my colleagues who are hesitant to travel alone. (Jennifer, 40, Associate Professor)

Similarly, unmarried non-academic interviewees perceived more autonomy in terms of freedom of physical mobility within their city, and between cities.

I can visit my relatives and friends. I can travel within [the] city, and inter-cities. Many times, I travelled to Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi for education and training purpose. I do inform my father, and that is like a strategy to get permission. He never ever refused me; you can say that is not 'seeking permission', but just to inform him. (Adele, 40, Coordinator)

Besides factors relating to gender, other factors that negatively affected women's freedom of physical mobility which emerged from analysis of the interviews are participants' personal fears, inter-caste conflicts, ethnic conflicts, bad governance and poor inter-city transportation, as illustrated below:

I travel alone within the city, but I do not travel alone from one city to another. I do inform my family; it is not like seeking for permission but yes, keeping family informed...we might call it a 'first consent'. Reasons behind not traveling alone are poor governance, poor transportation, lawlessness and inter-caste conflicts. (Grace, 45, Assistant Professor)

Thus, it is concluded from the above analysis that both academic and non-academic women perceive themselves as being autonomous in terms of physical mobility; however, their marital status and economic class have influenced their physical mobility. Middle-class married women have comparatively less physical mobility than unmarried academic and

non-academic participants. It seems that they have limited autonomy, and for them, 'autonomy' might include access to fewer financial resources and the amelioration of living standards. Married women from the rich and middle classes do not travel alone within the city, and they mostly travel with family members or servant/drivers, while the unmarried women travelled alone or with their friends. On the contrary, non-academic women travel alone or with their friends within the city, and between cities. It is witnessed that higher education and employment have provided these women with physical autonomy; however, demographic factors and gender norms have influenced women's physical autonomy. In the next section, I shall discuss women's autonomy over their health.

6. Autonomy over Health

Most of the available literature in gender studies suggests that women's access to health and family planning/contraception is one of the important indicators when measuring women's status, and autonomy—particularly in the South Asian region, which is known as 'belt of patriarchy' [18, 28]. Many researchers have measured the mother's capacity to decide about their children's affairs, while considering the relations between infants and children [33]. Various indices have been used to measure women's autonomy, access to health care is one index used in the South Asian context. Studies suggest a correlation between women's autonomy and maternal health care utilisation [34, 35], whereby women's increased autonomy improves maternal health service utilisation in developing countries [36]. Jeffery and Jeffery's findings in the context of rural North India suggested educated girls had more influence over their own marriages; however, caste and family patterns had an influence on fertility trends.

Considering 'women's access to health and family planning methods' as one of the most important indices in measuring female's autonomy, I attempted to seek out the perceptions of women about their 'health autonomy' by exploring their access to health, intra-spousal communication regarding the use of family planning methods, number of children (if any) and women's maternal health.

The quantitative findings reveal that 62% of academic and 40% of non-academic participants consult their husbands about family planning matters. However, the qualitative findings suggest a positive association between women's higher education and better maternal health, and women's higher education increases the utilisation of maternal health services and decreases the birth rate. The majority of interviewees exercised health autonomy, and they preferred to visit the doctor alone, or with female family members, rather than with their husbands. It is noticeable here that academic women, as they are economically sound, visit private female doctors for their medical (reproductive) checkups rather than public hospitals.⁶ The trend of visiting private clinics reveals the level of awareness amongst academic participants about their health issues—particularly reproductive health issues—and privileged access to health

⁶Since in Pakistan in general, and the province of Sindh in particular, public health services are not satisfactory, there is an emerging trend of private clinics in cities. Many private medical centers and laboratories can be found in cities. Second, due to corruption and poor governance, public health services have lost their credibility, even with the masses. Therefore, people in general (and rich/middle class in particular) prefer to private medical checkups.

facilities. Married women prefer to visit private female doctors alone; however, they are comfortable sharing all reproductive health issues with their husbands.

I am an independent woman. I myself visit my private female doctors; however, I am not hesitant to share reproductive health issues with my husband. (Charlotte, 45, Assistant Professor)

The majority of married women in the sample have two children; this indicates the level of awareness about their health, and the acceptance of contraception amongst urban-based professional women. Findings show that these women feel comfortable consulting and discussing with their partners the number of children they would like, methods of family planning and other reproductive health issues; as a mother of two children shares:

I feel comfortable sharing my [reproductive] health issues and family planning matters with my husband. However, my sister is a medical doctor, so I share and seek her advice. We have two boys and we wish to have a daughter—but after completion of my PhD, as I have been awarded a scholarship, and he has a PhD from the United Kingdom. (Caroline, 42, Assistant Professor)

The above quote indicates the wide acceptance of contraceptive practices in the middle classes, where career is given importance alongside women's health. Caroline and her husband's mutual decision to have one more child (hoping for a daughter) shows that she places value on communication between spouses, and having an intimate marital relationship. Such practices of mutual decision making about having children, and having intimate marital relationships in educated Sindhi families, indicate a positive shift from traditional family patterns to more egalitarian family patterns in educated Sindhi families based in urban areas. Most significantly, it was observed that women's household decision-making autonomy and economic autonomy were affected by the combination of class (her affiliation with middle class) and family structure (husband's joint family based in a village). Caroline, aside from these two types of autonomy (decision making and economic), has a greater health autonomy and intimate communication with her partner.

7. Perception of Independent Life

There is a culture of collectivism in the South Asian societies, and individual liberty has been discouraged. As most South Asian countries—including Pakistan—are basically patriarchal, the custom of collectivism has been regulated, reinforced and transmitted to the next generation through the system of kinship and extended family. As Pakistan falls into a 'patriarchal belt', and is a predominantly rural society (about 67%) based on kinship, extended family and caste, the concept of 'independence or liberty' is altogether distinctive that of from the West, and requires understanding in the local cultural milieu. Furthermore, in Pakistani society, women's modesty is linked with the family's honour. Specifically, amongst families with higher SES, a 'role model or good woman' is characterised as being unselfish, calm, tolerant, empathetic; able to organise, compromise, coordinate and maintain hospitality within the house [37]. Such characterisation of women has negatively influenced a woman's

independent life, choices and decisions. Thus, the family's honour, along with other cultural barriers, halts a person in general—and women in particular—being able to make individual choices. Women's choices and decisions are questioned in light of how they may affect or jeopardise her 'family honour' [38].

According to the perceptions and experiences of these professional women, 'independence/liberty' or 'independent life' is restricted, because the family is more important than a person's independence, or independent life, in a local context. When there is a comparison between the 'personal/social independence' of men and women in the broader socio-cultural perspectives, 'women's independent life' is defined in a local cultural context, and it is related to Islam and Muslim societies. To them, the Western concept of 'individual liberty' is considered 'delinquent behaviour' in the Pakistani context. Being Muslims, they have different identity and values, as illustrated below:

We are part of a family. We have no individual liberty or independence like people have in the Western societies. Our religion and cultural norms are altogether different from the West [And] We, being Muslims, have to follow them... we cannot go against our religious norms and traditions. Islam has set the boundaries for both sexes, and each [has] to remain in [their] fixed domain. (Cathy, 47, Associate Professor)

Interviewees shared that, being Eastern Muslim women, they are part of a family, and 'individuality' has no social acceptance and recognition in the society. It has been noticed that the family has a potential negative impact on 'personal autonomy or independence'; particularly on women's independence or independent life. As discussed above, the majority of academic and non-academic interviewees experienced autonomy in terms of household decision making, mobility, access to and control over financial resources and use of contraception; thus, they perceive themselves as 'independent'. However, perceiving themselves as independent, but simultaneously being part of Muslim families, they are responsible for following established religious and family norms or values which negate individuality. Thus, they acknowledge that there is no 'personal autonomy' like in the West; however, it is collective, and women's independence is relatively less than that of man in our society. Pakistan scores very low on the individualism score [24], and thus, being a collectivist society, emphasises togetherness and interconnectedness [9]. Therefore, in such a cultural context, these women define their meaning of personal autonomy, individuality and liberty within the framework of collectivism.

These women perceive that women's independence or independent life is based on her economic and household decision-making autonomy, and they perceive themselves as 'independent' as they have reached higher education and are doing paid work outside of the home without any restrictions from the family. Analysis of the interviews suggested that those who are economically independent perceived themselves to be more independent compared to those having lesser economic autonomy, as illustrated below:

Economic independence gives her confidence, while [the] family expects her economic role in the family's economic well-being. I have my own income, so I feel myself independent, whatever I want I can buy, and can travel as well. I am not dependent on someone. (Christina, 45, Assistant Professor)

Similarly, non-academic interviewees perceived themselves as 'independent' (as defined above in the local context). They also share that economic independence means one's not being dependent on the family or others, as illustrated below:

My university education has enhanced my self-confidence, and my employment has made me independent; thus, I am living my independent life. This sense of independence gives courage and raises your voice. It is very true when a person contributes to his/her family, then they [family] do listen to him/her more than a person who is economically dependent on family. (Agnes, 35, Librarian Assistant)

Thus, it is concluded that the concept of 'independent life' or 'individual independence or liberty' is variable, and should be studied and understood within local socio-cultural and socio-religious parameters. Being Muslim women and belonging to the middle classes, research participants perceive the concept of individuality or individual liberty seen in the Western society as a delinquent behaviour, and against the teachings of Islam and local cultural norms. They perceived themselves 'independent' in terms of economic stability, decision making, career development and physical mobility; however, they emphasise that in the context of Pakistani/Sindhi society there is no concept of 'individuality' or 'personal independence'. Therefore, individuals'—specifically women's—choices and decisions are centralised in the core of the family. Before making any personal choice or decisions, the individual's family honour and dignity are kept in mind.

8. Conclusion

From the findings of the chapter, it can be argued that the concepts of 'autonomy' and 'independence' may not be useful indices for measuring or assessing the social position or status of women in society, because these concepts are perceived and understood differently across the globe, and different meanings are attributed to them within groups of the same culture. The findings suggest that the notions of autonomy and independence are socially constructed, and the meanings attached to them are deeply rooted in cultural specificity; hence, cultural specificity should be taken into consideration in order to understand women's autonomy and independence. As Jeffery and Jeffery argue, asking 'who made' a particular decision is a crude indicator, which is unable to dissect the subtleties involved. Secondly, the 'women's autonomy paradigm' places undue emphasis on women's independent and autonomous actions. This has challenged the understanding of gendered structures, processes and inequalities in South Asia, as it ignores the strong emotional and structural bonds between women and men [9] and between individuals and the family. Jeffery et al., highlighting the cultural incongruity of 'autonomy' as a concept, found that those words that came closest to it, such as 'azadi' or 'khumukhtari' [39], have pejorative connotations at the individual level. In the local cultural context, the words *azad* and *mukhtiyar* refer to having control or authority to act as a free agent, but when applied to women, their positive resonance changes to a negative one, as seen with the use of *besharm* (immodest and shameless) [15].

The qualitative findings of this study suggested that 'collectivity' is the essence of Pakistani society while 'individuality' has socially and culturally been dishonoured—as Mumtaz and

Salway found, '*akhathe*' (togetherness or jointness) rather than individuality is the social ethic of the Pakistani society. Thus, in such a collectivist society, the concepts of autonomy, equality, independence and individuality (specifically women's) should be considered within the context of collectivism, rather than individualism and liberalism. Notions of autonomy and independence are related to the concept of individuality, which originates in western capitalist societies—particularly in America, where the individual is judged as an independent, self-contained agent, and valued equally—at least notionally—in law, within a dominant ethos that supports individualism [13]. These notions are understood differently in Pakistan, as in other South Asian societies, because an individual is neither an independent, nor a self-contained agent, but he or she establishes his or her uniqueness in the context of a group (family and caste). Mines, in the context of Tamil Nadu society, suggested two senses of individuality: a private (internal) sense and a public (civic) sense. In Tamil culture, civic individuality is circumscribed by ideas that stress altruism and, in effect, subordinate the self-interest of individuals to the interests of their groups. What distinguishes these two senses of individuality is that the internal sense involves a psychological awareness and evaluation of self, and the need to achieve some control in life. However, an individual's choices, decisions, personal autonomy or independence—specifically for women, as the notion of family honour is linked women's body/sexuality [40, 41]—are affected by family, marital status, caste, *biradari* (kinship/community) and class, along with the socio-cultural setting.

The findings also demonstrated that in the context of bounded or limited autonomy, the majority of academic and non-academic interviewees perceived themselves as autonomous in household decisions. However, the level of importance of any decisions made, and social settings—along with family structure, marital status, caste, ethnicity and class—are strong predictors of women's autonomy and independence within the context of collectivism, as South Asian culture does not encourage individualism and self-expression [42]. The practice of 'mutual decisions' in the richer and/or middle classes has been seen, which indicates how middle-class women negotiate and accommodate their own identity and social position within the family. They experienced that a 'husband's nature or temperament' has a potential influence on a wife's autonomy and independence.

Further, the findings of this chapter argued that ethnicity was a potential influencing factor on women's autonomy and independence. *Muhajir* women (migrants from India)—though usually more fully practicing Muslims—experienced comparatively greater autonomy than the Sindhi participants. This further indicated that region and culture are stronger predictors of women's autonomy than religion.

The findings observed women's experiences of greater economic autonomy and autonomy over health (including intra-spousal communication). This greater economic and health autonomy reflects women's strategies for maximising their life choices [28] within the framework of collectivism, as Mines suggests expression of [civic] individuality within togetherness in the Tamil society. The findings also argued that a spouse's higher education and better employment raise their socio-economic status (SES), and minimise economic crisis in the family. This maximises the chances of intra-spousal communication, intimacy and mutuality in their relationships.

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