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THIS ISSUE

We are delighted to share the tenth issue of the Gender Bi-Annual. As is our practice, this issue brings together voices from academia, civil society, and professional spaces, reflecting a wide range of perspectives and lived experiences. Across these pieces, a clarifying thread emerges: the burdens placed on women – legal, economic, emotional, and social – are built into the systems and norms that organise everyday life. Our contributors ask not only how these burdens are produced, but how they might be named and contested.

Academic Work opens with a critical examination of matrimonial property rights under Muslim Family Law in Pakistan, anchored in the recent Islamabad High Court ruling in *Mst. Amara Waqas v Muhammad Waqas Rasheed and others* (March 2026). The piece interrogates what the ruling means for wives' legal claims to marital property, and where current frameworks demand further reform. The second piece turns to Baloch women whose lives have been reshaped by enforced disappearances, tracing how they carry the weight of unpaid carework, grief, and political uncertainty simultaneously.

Practitioner Voices features a piece on gender and migration, drawing on the case of Palestinian women students considering study in Pakistan. The contributors explores how mobility restrictions and gendered norms shape who gets to move, and on whose terms.

The Gender and Design section examines disaster management policy in Pakistan, making a compelling case for gender-responsive frameworks in climate crisis response and calling for redesign of emergency systems that account for women's differentiated vulnerabilities.

This issue also includes pieces from two Saida Waheed Gender Initiative student grantees – one examining a female-led dars circle in Peshawar as a space where women use Islamic knowledge to navigate patriarchal constraints, and another reading contemporary wedding culture as a site of class performance and gendered pressure.

Happy reading!

MARRIAGE AS A PARTNERSHIP

MATRIMONIAL PROPERTY UNDER MUSLIM FAMILY LAW IN PAKISTAN

MUHAMMAD ZUBAIR ABBASI & KAVERI QURESHI

There are broadly two ways of thinking about marriage in Islamic law. The first sees it as a relationship of ownership: the husband holds effective control, reflected in his absolute right to divorce and the traditional requirement of his consent before a wife can dissolve the marriage through *khula*.[1] The second sees marriage as a religious duty and moral calling.[2] Neither model, on its own, adequately captures what marriage ought to look like in practice.

Image Credits: freepik.com

A third way, increasingly recognised by courts and scholars, draws on both: it treats marriage as a partnership, in which the spiritual equality of husband and wife before God translates into equal legal rights and mutual obligations within the marriage itself. It is this partnership model that Pakistan's superior courts have been gradually moving towards, and it is against this backdrop that the Islamabad High Court's recent judgment on matrimonial property must be understood.

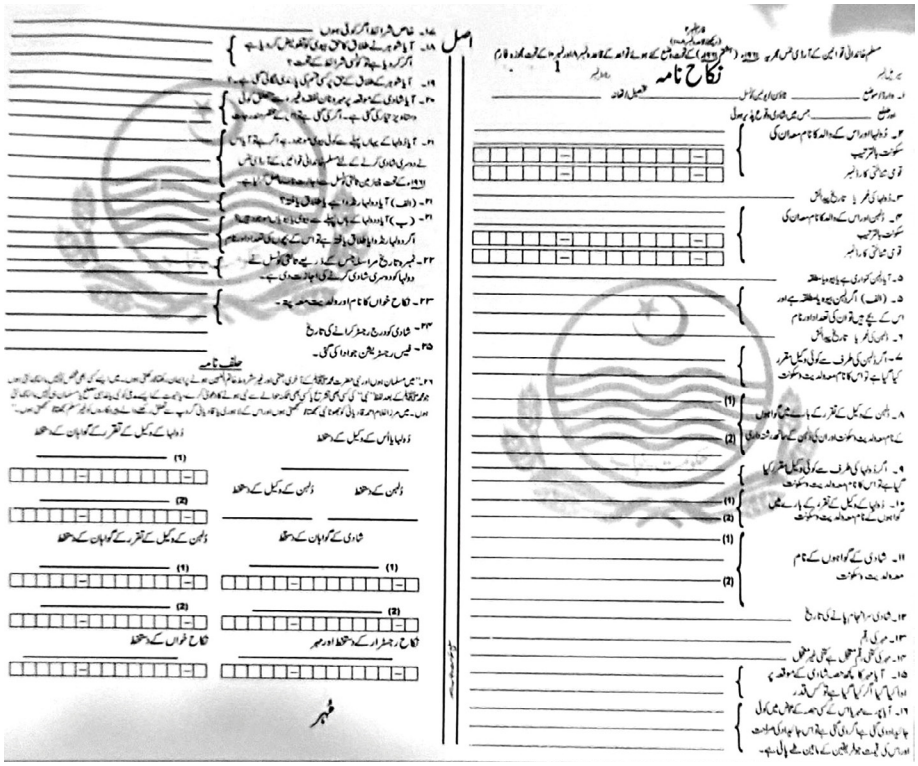
In *Mst. Amara Waqas v Muhammad Waqas Rasheed and others* (March 2026), the Islamabad High Court ruled that wives have a legal right to property accumulated during marriage under Islamic family law. Drawing on both Islamic and common law jurisprudence, Justice Kayani held that the principles of fairness require that a wife must share in the matrimonial property in addition to her other financial rights. He invoked the classical Islamic legal doctrine of partnership (*shariqah*), noting that where both spouses contribute to the acquisition of property, shared ownership may be recognised.

The judgment marks a significant milestone. For the first time, a superior court in Pakistan has recognised a wife's legal right to matrimonial property and has held that the unpaid work she performs at home such as raising children, managing the household, and supporting family life, has genuine economic value that the law must acknowledge. And is a landmark step forward in protecting women's financial rights in the event of divorce in Pakistan,[3] as argued in scholarly literature.[4]

> **For the first time, a superior court in Pakistan has recognised a wife's legal right to matrimonial property and has held that the unpaid work she performs at home such as raising children, managing the household, and supporting family life, has genuine economic value that the law must acknowledge.**

The judgment contributes to a growing body of Supreme Court jurisprudence that has progressively strengthened women's rights within marriage. In *Ambreen Akram v Asad Ullah Khan* (2025), Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah held that a wife's right to maintenance arises from the moment of marriage itself, and not from *rukhsati* or the consumption of the marriage. In *Muhammad Aslam Chattha v Shehnaz Akhtar Zahoor Ahmed* (2025), Justice Shahid Waheed held that a wife's claim to maintenance is not subject to any limitation period, since it is a recurring right; he further held that a husband's duty to provide maintenance is akin to that of a debtor, not merely a moral obligation. In *Ibrahim Khan v Mst Saima Khan and others* (2024), Justice Ayesha Malik held that a wife remains entitled to her dower even where her husband's conduct compelled her to seek *khula*, a divorce initiated by the wife.

Yet the transformation is incomplete. One area of family law that urgently needs reform is a remedy called restitution of conjugal rights, a court order that forces a spouse who has left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the marriage to return home and live with their partner. This rule was never part of Islamic law. It was brought in by British colonial courts from Christian legal tradition, and it has no grounding in Islamic teaching.[5] In practice, husbands use it as a tactical weapon: when a wife goes to court seeking financial support, divorce, or custody of her children, her husband files for this order — effectively asking the court to send her home rather than hear her out. Despite sitting so uncomfortably with both Islamic values and constitutional guarantees of dignity and equality, Pakistani courts have so far refused to do away with it.[6] Removing it remains one of the most overdue changes in Pakistani family law.

> “As judges treat marriage as a partnership of equals, they must move forward and leave behind remedies that belong to an older and discredited model, one in which a husband could compel his wife to return home rather than answer her grievances.”

These developments point to something larger than doctrinal reform. When courts recognise that a wife's unpaid labour at home has genuine economic value, they are implicitly challenging the assumption that has long structured both law and social expectation: that the husband earns and the wife depends. Giving legal weight to care work, including cooking, raising children, managing the household, begins to dismantle the idea that only paid work counts. This matters for how we think about marriage, about who bears its costs, and about what women are owed when it ends. As judges treat marriage as a partnership of equals, they must move forward and leave behind remedies that belong to an older and discredited model, one in which a husband could compel his wife to return home rather than answer her grievances. That colonial-era remedy, imported into Muslim personal law without any grounding in Islamic tradition, has no place in a legal order that affirms the dignity and financial rights of wives. Abolishing it is not simply a legal technicality; it is a necessary step towards a conception of marriage in which women enter, remain, and leave on equal terms.

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Image Credits: freepik.com

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EARNING AND YEARNING

BALOCH WOMEN WHO CARRY ON

KINZA FATIMA

So much of women's work, whether that is carework or paid work, particularly in the informal sector, is unseen and yet indispensable. Unfolding in homes, and behind veils, *Baloch* women's work is unique in that it interlaced with grief - of enforced disappearances and militarization that affects their labor and their household alike. Indeed, women in Balochistan carry out their economic and domestic labor while also grieving for their loved ones. There are no clear boundaries between waiting and working: The hands that sew intricate embroidery do so whilst mourning their family members without a grave, and waiting with uncertainty. This exemplifies a slow violence that is not abrupt, does not make it to news headlines.

This also reflects the gendered dimension of political violence, where these Baloch women disproportionately bear

Image Credits: www.instagram.com/baluchzubii/

Image Credits: https://images.dawn.com/news/1192324

the economic and social costs. Understanding Baloch women's lived experiences in which they navigate coping strategies, while also sustaining their communities and households, shows that they are not passive victims, and mirrors the gendered political economy of Pakistan.

Naseema joins the missing persons camp most days for her missing brother, who disappeared in 2014. For Naseema, it's been 12 years since she has been mourning for her brother. Her brother's wife has not been well since he disappeared. She is not ill exactly, but it is something that has no medical name. It is a slow collapse that manifests physically because the body orbits around the grief. Naseema's mother also passed away, while mourning and waiting for her son. She told her mother that she had stopped eating well, stopped eating enough, then she developed pain in her chest, until one day, she had to be hospitalized, and died of cardiac arrest. Naseema knows it was not merely a cardiac arrest, but the body's limit of waiting. But, for Naseema, life insists on continuing. That's how grief and hope coexist for Baloch women.

“Understanding Baloch women's lived experiences in which they navigate coping strategies, while also sustaining their communities and households, shows that they are not passive victims, and mirrors the gendered political economy of Pakistan.”

Naseema loves playing with her nieces and nephews, but it also comes with responsibilities. She does the grocery shopping, goes to the market where roads are often unsafe, and when she gets home, she cooks. Despite the kitchen feeling like a place where time has become strange, her brother and mother are absent yet present everywhere emotionally, there are children to feed and elders to take care of.

Naseema's daily life is structured around many responsibilities, which she

Image Credits: www.blog.ted.com/embroidery-for-empowerment-a-qa-with-khalida-brohi/

manages largely on her own. These tasks also represent a continuous expenditure of physical labor and time, which remain essential to the functioning of the household. Such care work is an active investment in the well-being of her family despite grieving simultaneously for her brother.

In another home, Kulsoom sits by the window with her legs crossed, with a pile of fabrics in her lap. She knows the art of doing Balochi embroidery and the faster she finishes, the earlier she can finish her order and earn some money. For Kulsoom, the pay is low and sometimes delayed. Her fingers ache due to their steady movement through the cloth, but still she continues. Her brother has been gone for years, and this heartache governs her life. When she stitches, she thinks of her brother, while her mother recites a prayer in the room on the prayer-mat, hands cupped, praying for her son's safety.

“She chose the path to pursue medicine before her brother disappeared. Now, her desire to become a doctor seems like a scattered dream since her brother disappeared. She feels her home is a fractured household in financial crisis.”

Kulsoom attends college—she is studying pre-medical. She chose the path to pursue medicine before her brother disappeared. Now, her desire to become a doctor seems like a scattered dream since her brother disappeared. She feels her home is a fractured household in financial crisis. When she comes back home from college, she studies, and on weekends she sews and earns, keeping her family's head above water.

Sometimes, she goes to the local court hoping to find her brother. Indeed, Kulsoom moves forward with life by choosing what is best for her family while also demanding justice. She does all this while carrying the psychological weight of unresolved loss. But this does not replace or halt her domestic responsibilities and paid work.

These lived realities of Baloch women reflect the complexities of their lives. They grapple with violence, loss, and uncertainty while

“The radical act for Baloch women is not always in dramatic revolutions, but in the simple act of continuity in their everyday, mundane lives. The refusal to stop. To keep filing for petitions in court, even when they are adjourned without result.”

performing their everyday roles as caregivers. They are also thrusted into becoming breadwinners and sustaining their families through paid work.

In Balochistan, structural invisibility is compounded across three layers that makes Baloch women's lived experiences complex and intertwined. The first is the geographical marginalization. Since the inception of Pakistan, Balochistan has seen an extraction of its natural resources, without equivalent investments back into the province by the federal government – an 'internal colonialism'[2]. Secondly, the militarization of the region not only creates threats but also creates gendered vulnerabilities, where women's hypervisibility means that they have to navigate public spaces with calculated risk[3]. Thirdly, patriarchal dynamics operate across multiple scales—at household, community, and institutional levels. These shape the power relations, everyday experiences of women, and access to resources, invisibilizing much, if not all, of the work that they do. These women are at the stove, at sewing machines, in the kitchen, at protests, in missing persons camps, in the market, haggling without apology. They are doing all this while mourning and living in the uncertainty of perpetual violence.

The radical act for Baloch women is not always in dramatic revolutions, but in the simple act of continuity in their everyday, mundane lives. The refusal to stop. To keep filing for petitions in court, even when they are adjourned without result. To keep sewing, and to keep building even with accumulated grief and fear. To understand these women's labor in all its dimensions in Pakistan, we must begin by expanding the definition of development and labor. Here, there is a need to go beyond paid work, that is often the easiest to define and measure, and encompass acts of care and domestic maintenance and responsibilities: tasks that often go unremunerated and invisibilized but remain at the core of what ultimately sustain us. Recognizing these women's invisible labor exposes the forms of exploitation and violence that come into play. It also requires a nuanced understanding of women's autonomy and economic value, which needs to be contextualized on the basis of gender, class, geography, citizenship, and ethnicity.

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1. Author has used pseudonyms to protect the identities of interlocuters
2. United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Written statement submitted by the Center for Victims of Torture, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status,* Fifty-ninth session, Agenda item 9, UN Doc. A/HRC/59/NGO/335 (April 15, 2026), https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/59/NGO/335.
3. Gqola, Pumla Dineo, et al. “Gender and public space.” Gender & Development 32.1-2 (2024): 1-25

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CROSSING BORDERS, CARRYING BARRIERS

A GENDERED MIGRATION LENS

SANAM KUBRA SIDDIQUI
& NOOR IMRAN

When invited to contribute, we felt both honored and challenged to explore a subject that was deeply personal, yet analytically meaningful. Drawing on our work with refugee students in Pakistan, we turned to a question that repeatedly surfaced but remained underexplored: who gets to leave, and why?

Over the past six months, through our work with the Zaman Foundation on the Resilience Support Program (TRSP), supported by Pledges Inc., we have worked with 100 Palestinian students studying in Pakistan. While the program has been successful in supporting students financially and socially, one statistic stood out starkly: only 5 of these students are women. Nationally, female Palestinian students constitute less than 10% of this cohort.

On deeper reflection, we agreed that this disparity is not incidental. Rather, it signifies deeper structural, cultural, and economic constraints that shape mobility for women in particular.

Existing research on migration highlights that mobility is not gender-neutral. In conflict and displacement settings, migration is often "masculinized," with men positioned as economic actors and risk-bearers, while women's movement is constrained by safety concerns and social expectations[1].

Studies on refugee education in Pakistan further demonstrate that barriers are multi-layered, and include legal, economic, cultural, and institutional factors. These barriers disproportionately affect women who face additional restrictions on mobility, financial independence, and access to opportunities[2].

Against this backdrop, the low participation of Palestinian women in international education is not surprising; yet the lived experiences underpinning it remain under examined.

As women's rights practitioners, we repeatedly return to this disparity not as an anomaly, but as a pattern embedded within broader gendered systems. Existing literature highlights[3] [4] the "double burden"[5] of migration borne by women and girls, where pre-existing gender discrimination is intensified by displacement through increased exposure to hardship, exploitation and violence, and an overall sense of fear and uncertainty.

"On deeper reflection, we agreed that this disparity is not incidental. Rather, it signifies deeper structural, cultural, and economic constraints that shape mobility for women in particular."

The disproportionately low presence of Palestinian women students in Pakistan compelled us to move beyond statistics. We collected testimonies from Palestinian students currently studying in Pakistan, revealing that migration, particularly for women, is rarely an individual decision. Instead, it emerges through negotiations shaped by family approval, cultural expectations, and perceptions of safety. Mobility for women is therefore conditional—not only on opportunity, but on social acceptability.

The testimonies repeatedly demonstrated how decisions around studying abroad are filtered through concerns around cultural familiarity, protection, and family trust, and reinforced our hypothesis that mobility and migration are heavily gendered, as informed also by refugee movements and migration studies, particularly in the conflict regions of Middle East & the Arab World.

As one student shared, "*In our culture, it is often difficult for families to feel comfortable sending their daughters far away… I chose Pakistan because it is culturally similar… my family felt more comfortable.*"

Indeed, families are more willing to support women's mobility when destination countries are perceived as culturally or religiously proximate.

Issues and concerns of safety are often framed as a concern but often serving as a means of control. Hence, safety operates as a gatekeeping mechanism, framed as protection, reinforcing existing restrictions on women's independence and mobility.

"*Security and personal safety are among the most important factors… what might be difficult for a young man becomes even more complex for a young woman.*"

Women and girls have limited autonomy, in the decision-

making process, particularly around moving abroad. Migration, like other decisions, is a negotiated one:

"*... having a companion like a brother or uncle... or even becoming engaged... makes the process much easier...*"[6]

There is never one reason: *"there are religious reasons, and sometimes cultural ones... **the idea of a girl traveling alone is difficult to accept**... but her traveling with a brother is reasonable and acceptable..."*[7]

Mobility, in this sense, is rarely self-determined. It is mediated through male accompaniment, family approval, and socially acceptable arrangements. Women must negotiate not only logistics, but legitimacy.

Beyond cultural norms, structural constraints further restrict women's mobility. Research shows that refugee students face economic hardship, limited access to scholarships, and institutional barriers encompassing documentation and administrative policies.[8] These barriers often include prolonged equivalency certification processes, documentation requirements such as passports, visas, and Proof of Registration (POR) cards, as well as policies requiring students or family members to travel for document verification. Such procedures disproportionately impact women and girls, who frequently face mobility restrictions, financial dependency, and family-imposed limitations on travelling independently. In contexts like Gaza, where mobility is already severely restricted, these gendered barriers become amplified.

Elderly woman displaced uses walker to get through rubble in Jabalia Camp, Gaza Strip, © 2024 UNRWA Photo by Hussein Jaber

The testimonies highlight this intersection of gender, economic inequality and structural barriers which hinder women and girls to migrate independently. Hurdles steeped in not only cultural and social norms but also "*...financial dependency, and the additional responsibilities placed on women, especially in difficult situations such as conflict and displacement.*"[9]

> **"The disproportionately low presence of Palestinian women students in Pakistan compelled us to move beyond statistics. We collected testimonies from Palestinian students currently studying in Pakistan, revealing that migration, particularly for women, is rarely an individual decision."**

Students also pointed toward potential solutions emphasizing safety, financial support, and awareness. However, their responses suggest that access alone is not enough. The literature reinforces this. Addressing educational inequalities among refugee populations requires multi-level interventions, including financial support, gender-sensitive institutional policies, and sustained community engagement. For women from conflict-affected communities, this engagement must extend beyond universities and into families and refugee support networks. Community engagement must also move beyond abstract policy language and translate into intentional spaces for connection for women, trust-building, and collective support. For students displaced by conflict, community-fostering initiatives such as

peer-support circles, cultural exchange events, mentorship programs, and youth-led gatherings can help reduce isolation and strengthen a sense of belonging within host societies. By fostering visible, supportive communities, institutions can help families feel more confident about women pursuing education abroad while simultaneously creating environments where refugee students are socially, emotionally, and culturally supported. Such interventions are essential to shifting perceptions around safety, independence, and the legitimacy of women studying abroad.[10]

> **Beyond cultural norms, structural constraints further restrict women's mobility. Research shows that refugee students face economic hardship, limited access to scholarships, and institutional barriers encompassing documentation and administrative policies.**

Simply put, *"There should be more scholarships and financial support for women, greater awareness about educational opportunities, improved safety and support systems, and stronger social acceptance of women studying and living independently abroad."* [11]

These lived realities show us that the gender gap in student migration is not simply about who has access to opportunities. It is about who is allowed, supported, and enabled to pursue them. Increasing female participation in international education requires moving beyond scholarships and programmatic support. It demands a systemic approach—one that engages families, reshapes cultural narratives, strengthens safety infrastructure, and expands economic agency for women. Without addressing these intersecting barriers, mobility will remain unevenly distributed: accessible in principle, yet unattainable in practice.

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Noor Imran is a feminist development professional with over 10 years of experience in advocacy, program management, and youth and women's rights across South Asia.

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6. Male Student (1st Year) at Sargodha Medical College
7. Male Student (1st Year) at Sargodha Medical College
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9. Female Student at University of Lahore
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11. Female Student at University of Lahore

THE HIDDEN BIAS IN DISASTER RESPONSE DESIGN

Photo Credits: ©Geert van Kesteren/Magnum Photos

BISMAH DRESHAK

When disasters sweep through cities, they are often described as "gender-neutral", yet they impact vulnerable populations, including women of lower socioeconomic status and pregnant women disproportionately[1]. Worldwide estimates indicate that around 80% of climate change affectees are women[2]; facing loss of livelihoods, gender-based violence (GBV), and challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) as well as family planning (FP) services when climate disasters strike. Here, social, economic and cultural factors, including gender roles, discrimination, and existing inequalities, such as restricted mobility or access to resources[3], amplify women's vulnerabilities.

While responses to disasters and the following mobilization efforts seem impartial, in reality these often mask biases. Indeed, most climate

and disaster responses are designed around the survival of a "default" citizen who is mobile, male, economically active[4], and unburdened by care work[5]. When floods hit, the evacuation orders assume people can move quickly, swim if needed, and leave home without permission. These assumptions are not neutral. Instead, they actively negate gender by treating male experiences as universal and rendering women's realties as invisible.

For example, during the Gujarat Floods in India, disaster warnings reached men faster than women because they were given through television, radio and mobile phones which men typically have greater access to[6]. Furthermore, women found it difficult to evacuate to safer areas because they were not encouraged to learn how to swim[7]. Similar instances of deprivation have been recorded for Pakistan too. During the Pakistan floods of 2022, around 650,000 pregnant Pakistani women were estimated to lack access to healthcare and were forced to give birth under the open sky[8]. Almost eight million girls and women lacked access to toilets and basic menstrual hygiene products[9]. Additionally, an increase in sexual violence was also reported against women[10]. This is not an accidental oversight but rather a deliberate blind spot that reveals a deeper hidden bias: early-warning systems, evacuation plans, relief camps, food distribution, and health services systematically fail to consider the needs of women and girls.

Photo Credits: https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/this-is-how-natural-disasters-impact-men-and-women-differently-and-why-gender-equality-efforts-must-consider-climate-change/

> **"The statistics above reveal that so long as disaster response strategies continue to ignore gendered realities, affected women will remain at risk. This holds true even when we consider broader climate-related, and not just disaster focused, responses."**

The statistics above reveal that so long as disaster response strategies continue to ignore gendered realities, affected women will remain at risk. This holds true even when we consider broader climate-related, and not just disaster focused, responses. Around 158 million women will be pushed towards poverty by 2050 due to climate change[11]. Clearly, climate change exacerbates existing inequalities and pushes vulnerable groups deeper into the margins. Therefore, adopting gender-responsive disaster management and climate adaption frameworks is imperative to reducing inequalities and achieving sustainable development.

Similarly, there is an immediate need to bridge policy gaps so that women and girls can thrive in the face of climate-related challenges. There is a need for gender mainstreaming in all policy targets and goals as it is important to increase their effectiveness, fairness and sustainability. A few steps can be taken to support this approach.

Foremost amongst these is to design *inclusive policies* through active community engagement. Here, it is imperative to ensure the participation of women in designing and implementing culturally relevant and acceptable

interventions regarding women's protection and their health. Initiatives must take into account gendered pressures, expectations and norms. Engaging multiple stakeholders within the community (and beyond) while making women the primary partners in the design process will allow for better take-up and implementation of projects while creating potential for greater impact for change as well. For this to effectively happen though, we must focus on *data for development*.

It is vital to collect data to understand the situations and ground realities of women which will aid in policy making. Similarly, budgets for disaster management must be gender-responsive, with gendered analyses of fiscal responses to disasters made standard practice. Such data can help governments identify where women face the greatest vulnerabilities and service gaps, allowing resources to be allocated more equitably and efficiently. In turn, this can ensure that funding for healthcare, protection services, relief distribution, safe shelters, sanitation, and livelihood recovery directly reflects the differentiated needs and experiences of women and girls during and after climate disasters.

“Engaging multiple stakeholders within the community (and beyond) while making women the primary partners in the design process will allow for better take-up and implementation of projects while creating potential for greater impact for change as well.”

Finally, Pakistan must develop gender responsive Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) plans. NDCs are action plans submitted by each country under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to show how they intend to reduce emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change[12]. The NDC is customized to the country's national circumstances, capabilities, and development priorities, and reflects the nation's commitment to global climate targets. Here, building “a gender-responsive monitoring, reporting and verification system” into our NDCs will go a long way in helping improve gendered outcomes post disasters and as we build systems to combat the effects of climate change.

Hence, while it is important to include gender-inclusive policies and build data frameworks it is equally important to systematically assess how gender-responsive disaster management and climate-response interventions really are. After all, it is only through the implementation of gender-aware systems that we will truly support gender equality[13] in the face of increasingly frequent and severe climate disasters.

1. Ajibade, McBean, and Bezner-Kerr, “Urban Flooding in Lagos,” 1714–1725.
2. Waheed, “Climate Change's Greatest Victims Are Women and Girls.”
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KHORWALI
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF PIETY

TOOBA ADINA NAEEM

In contemporary Pakistan, the dars, an informal gathering, typically held in a private home, in which women come together to study and discuss Islamic texts, has become a central yet deeply contested site of social and moral negotiation. Alongside a largely domestic and independent practice, the drawing room dars has also increasingly intersected with the programmes and networks of formal religious organisations, including Al-Huda and the women's wings of parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, particularly from the 1980s onward. Emerging in the context of post-Zia Islamisation, the Afghan Jihad, and the global war on terror these spaces have shaped new forms of Islamic education and practice among urban, middle-class women, offering an alternative vision of piety that departs from dominant narratives of Islam as either oppressive or extremist."

Photo Credits: AI Image

In my research I explore how a female-led dars in Peshawar functions as a space where women use Islam itself to negotiate the constraints of a patriarchal order, generating new forms of community and authority. Through three months of participant observation and interviews, I use Mahmood[1]'s concept of piety to understand these women's agency as operating within patriarchal structures of power while also simultaneously cultivating space, community, and friendship through religion.

The dars I study is led by Dr. Nadia Ali, a senior member of Jumaat-e-Islami and the retired senior Professor in a university in Peshawar. It began when Haniya, the hostess, expressed her desire to host a dars. When I asked Haniya, whose husband is also a Jumaat-e-Islami member,

> **These women work around their families' timetables to find time for the dars without causing disruption at home. They work within societal expectations of domesticity and do not leave the home to practise piety.**

why she had wanted to take the initiative, she said she wanted to "*bring people together in the name of God*" — but also simply to get to know the people in the neighbourhood. This gathering has since become the site of relationships that have deepened with time.

Ali uses everyday life as a site of comparison in her dars, encouraging her students to be not passive receivers but political actors. In one discussion of the Quranic word qiyam, she explained that to truly follow God's word, one must be in a position of power to "establish" God's laws, not merely pray five times a day, but engage actively with the political world. She actively fundraises for JI and Al-Khidmat and is critical of parties that adopt an "Islamic touch" for electoral appeal. She also believes in engaging with different groups of people across the spectrum of religious practice, believing that each person has something to contribute and to learn.

The members of this dars are largely housewives or retirees, which is why, when the timing shifted from 4–6pm to 11am–1pm for the winters, it caused little inconvenience. It was, in fact, preferred, since husbands and children were away at work or school. However, this change meant that working women couldn't attend and could only exist on the outskirts of this community.

These women work around their families' timetables to find time for the dars without causing disruption at home. They work within societal expectations of domesticity and do not leave the home to practise piety. Instead, they remain within it, moving between homes in ways that are legible as domestic and therefore uncontroversial. This movement through domestic space is precisely what allows these gatherings to persist without provoking pushback.

When a national holiday clashed with the day of the dars, multiple women had

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texted in the dars group chat asking whether it would go on for that week. While the dars had gone on, despite Haniya's husband being at home, it had caused significant anxiety. There had been multiple phone calls between the different members asking the same question and thinking for alternatives. That day, before it had begun, Khozaima had laughed and commented, "*Of course, we women would still gather for the dars, one man's presence couldn't stop this*", even though the previous day's anxiety was testament to the fact that it very easily could have.

Within this new community, these women deeply value the spaces they carve out for themselves, both as hosts and participants. Men's spaces, by contrast, appear readily available: in housing society parks, mosques, outside them, corner grocery markets, streets, and drawing rooms or hujras, often occupying entire basements in newly built

houses in Peshawar's DHA[2]. Women on the other hand, as is obvious in the participants' anxiety and in Khozaima's remark, must meticulously carve space out and, aware of its fragility and value, actively work to sustain and protect it.

Mohsina, a newly retired single mother, told me that during the nine years she spent in her previous colony she barely knew anyone. Everyone, she said, was "locked up" in their homes. Her afternoons had become especially lonely after her children moved out, but now she looks forward to the dars and the community she has found there. The dars becomes an avenue to find community and friendship that might otherwise have been considered unnecessary, frivolous or otherwise inaccessible considering the lack of alternative community gathering spaces for women of the neighbourhood.

Two months into my fieldwork, Haniya's mother suddenly fell ill and passed away within the week. The dars took place that week at her next-door neighbour Khozaima's house. While the women discussed when they should go to Haniya's for dua, Khozaima said: "*We must go soon, we have khorwali*" (sisterhood). The khorwali extended far beyond a condolence visit. The women collectively sent food to Haniya's home for days and Khozaima hosted the dars for the following weeks. Members have since started checking in on those who don't attend, or who are known to be struggling with their mental health.

Alongside grieving together, these women also celebrate

Photo Credits: AI Image

Women in Peshawar not only brought snacks to contribute to the chai after dars but also helped with cleaning up.

together. When Fatima's daughter Aimen was getting married, all the women pitched in to throw her a mehendi party. Mohsina's daughter is also getting married, and she has sent invitations to all the women of the dars. These women met through a religious gathering, and within months cultivated relationships that extend well beyond its original context.

Therefore, I believe that this dars exists as a space that goes beyond simply participating in the global piety movement. It is also a means for women to use religion to carve out space for themselves, to meet people, form friendships, and socialise. These friendships are nurtured week by week, gradually becoming warmer and more sincere. Women in Peshawar not only brought snacks to contribute to the chai after dars but also helped with cleaning up. The dars would often not end in the drawing room, but in the kitchen, with everyone coming together to wash dishes and wipe down kitchen counters. These moments of intimacy centre my essay, where these women not only find kin in these gatherings, but sustain those relationships, not for society or their husband's social circles, but for themselves, for khorwali.

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All names used in this paper have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants, in accordance with the preferences of the dars members, except Mohsina's who wished to have her real name used.

1. Saba Mahmood "Politics of Piety"
2. Defense Housing Authority, Peshawar is a new upper middle-class neighborhood in the city. The housing colony is majorly empty or under construction.

PIXELS AND PRESSURE

DIGITAL PERFORMATIVITY OF WEDDINGS AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURES ON BRIDES

IMAN TAHIR & ZAINAB RANA

Introduction

Pakistani weddings have long been important social and cultural events shaped by ritual, kinship, and collective celebration. Today, however, social media increasingly influences how weddings are imagined, planned, and experienced. Instagram reels, bridal photoshoots, cinematic trailers, and influencer aesthetics have transformed weddings into highly visible performances consumed both online and offline.

Drawing on interviews with brides, parents, photographers, makeup artists, and designers, alongside participant observation, this study examines how weddings have become sites of performativity, class signalling, and psychological pressure. [1]Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework helps explain this transformation, as weddings increasingly function as performances directed simultaneously toward physical guests and digital audiences. While social media presents weddings as glamorous and aspirational, our findings reveal the labour, comparison, and anxiety behind these curated images.

Pre-Wedding Formation: Social Expectations and Pressure

For many participants, wedding pressure began long before any formal planning took place. Brides described growing up surrounded by conversations about beauty, marriage, and family reputation, and by the time they became engaged many already carried internalized ideas about what their wedding should look like. One bride remarked, "I had Pinterest boards before I even knew who I would marry." Another described how relatives began discussing venues, outfits, and guest numbers the moment her engagement was announced: "It felt like the wedding belonged to everyone before it belonged to me."

Parents frequently viewed weddings as reflections of family honour and social standing. One mother admitted that even when families wanted smaller ceremonies, they feared being judged for appearing "less capable" than others in their social circle. This pressure was not simply financial but symbolic. It was also heavily gendered: brides consistently carried the greatest burden, describing constant comments about weight, skincare, appearance, and posture. One recalled being told to begin skincare treatments months before her engagement was even announced. "Everyone keeps reminding you that all eyes will be on you," she explained.

Social media intensified these expectations. Brides repeatedly described comparing themselves to highly curated wedding content and often feeling inadequate before planning had begun. One explained that scrolling through Instagram made her feel every wedding needed to be "unique, aesthetic, and expensive," while another admitted her own plans suddenly felt "too simple." This pressure was deeply tied to class. Lower-income brides were particularly conscious of the standards being normalized online; one avoided posting photographs because she felt her wedding "didn't look Instagram-worthy." Wedding culture therefore increasingly reproduces class distinctions through digital visibility.

Designing the Wedding: Commodification and Digital Influence

As planning begins, social expectations become material decisions. Weddings now involve extensive networks of photographers, makeup artists, stylists, decorators, and social media teams, a commercial wedding industry centred on aesthetics and branding, where family networks once organized everything.

Designing the Wedding: Commodification and Digital Influence

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Designers and makeup artists noted that clients

often arrive with Instagram screenshots rather than original ideas, referencing celebrity weddings, influencer campaigns, and viral bridal looks. “People don’t ask what suits them anymore,” one designer observed. “They ask for what they saw online.” Social media therefore functions both as inspiration and marketplace, with a single viral bridal look capable of shaping client demand for an entire season. During fieldwork, several weddings included neon hashtag signs, staged selfie corners, and backdrops designed specifically for online engagement.

Traditions have not disappeared; they have been repackaged through digital and commercial logics. Rituals such as mehndi and rukhsati remain central, but their presentation increasingly prioritizes visual appeal and shareability. Photographers described families restructuring timelines and lighting around photography requirements; at one wedding, the bride’s entrance was delayed because videographers wanted better lighting for cinematic footage. Global and diasporic influences shape these developments further, as participants frequently referenced weddings seen abroad or through Pakistani influencers overseas. The result, one designer noted, is “global aesthetics with local rituals” celebrations that are simultaneously traditional and internationally recognizable.

Performing and Archiving the Wedding

The wedding itself functions as a carefully managed public performance. Across interviews and observations, participants described constant awareness of cameras, audiences, and future online circulation. Entrances, dances, and emotional moments were paused or repeated to capture ideal footage; during one rukhsati, the couple was asked to recreate their walk because the drone shot had not been captured properly.

This performance was especially demanding for brides. One explained that she spent most of her wedding worrying about whether her makeup, posture, and expressions looked correct on camera, while another admitted she barely ate because she was conscious of constant photographs. Bridal labour reached its peak during the wedding itself, where women were expected to remain visually perfect, emotionally composed, and socially available for hours.

The wedding does not end when the events conclude; it becomes a digital archive. For most brides, posting was an expected continuation of the wedding. One scheduled her uploads across several days so that “each event gets its moment,” while another waited nearly three weeks so her feed would look “cohesive.” Photographers confirmed that rapid circulation is now expected, with couples often requesting teaser reels within 48 hours. This archive is not equally accessible to everyone. Weddings featuring luxury venues, designer labels, and multiple outfit changes consistently receive higher engagement, while simpler weddings remain less visible, reinforcing existing social hierarchies and establishing norms about what constitutes a successful wedding.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that contemporary Pakistani weddings are increasingly shaped by consumer culture, globalization, and digital media. Weddings remain culturally significant, but they now operate as public performances requiring the management of both physical and online audiences. These shifts also create tension between generations: parents often emphasize ritual and communal meaning, while younger participants focus on how the wedding will appear and be remembered online.

The consequences are particularly evident for brides, who experience intense pressure to meet aesthetic and social expectations. Many described ongoing comparison, anxiety, and regret generated by digital visibility, one repeatedly checking how her posts were performing, another regretful after comparing her wedding to more elaborate ones. Through social media, weddings have become more than personal milestones; they are enduring performances whose value is measured through visibility, circulation, and public validation.

APPENDIX

Image 1:
The bride sits before an elaborate floral installation, dressed in a Bunto Kazmi ensemble reportedly valued at approximately PKR 3 million, paired with heavy gold jewellery. The image illustrates how bridal aesthetics function as a direct display of class, where designer labels and material value become central to how weddings are staged, captured, and circulated.

Photo credit: Authors’ fieldwork

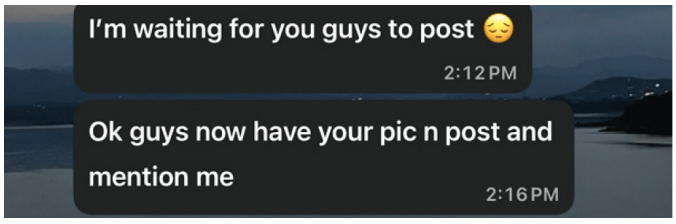

Image 2:
Post-wedding communication reveals the urgency of digital circulation, with requests to upload and tag content immediately after the event. Sharing is not optional but expected, reflecting how social validation is embedded into the wedding's afterlife.

Photo credit: Authors' fieldwork

Image 3:
Family members gather on a decorated stage, pausing for a formal photograph under carefully curated lighting and décor. Such staged group portraits reflect how weddings are structured around visibility, where moments are organized for documentation rather than spontaneity.

Photo credit: Authors' fieldwork

Image 4:
In contrast to large-scale venues, a more intimate setting presents a simplified aesthetic, yet the bride remains positioned for photography under controlled lighting. Even smaller weddings reflect the same emphasis on visual composition, showing how digital expectations extend across different scales of celebration.

Photo credit: Authors' fieldwork

Image 5:
An intimate rukshati moment is surrounded and directed by multiple photographers, with cameras framing the interaction from all sides. Emotional expressions are captured through layers of mediation, highlighting how even private moments are produced for future viewing.

Photo credit: Authors' fieldwork

Zainab Rana is a senior Anthropology and Sociology major at LUMS whose interests lie at the intersection of psychology, culture, and the social patterns that influence identity, behaviour, and contemporary life.

Iman Tahir is a LUMS Anthropology and Sociology graduate whose work combines qualitative research, storytelling, and social inquiry to explore culture, community, and social change in Pakistan.

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