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**Women's Empowerment and Marital Decision-Making in Rural Sinjavi, District Ziarat, Balochistan: A Mixed-Methods Study**

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**Abstract:**

*The present study investigated the role of women in marital decision-making in rural Sinjavi, District Ziarat, Balochistan. Women's empowerment remains a critical issue in developing societies, particularly in tribal regions where cultural traditions and gender norms significantly influence women's autonomy. In Sinjavi, women contribute substantially to household and agricultural activities; however, they possess limited authority in making decisions regarding their marriages. The traditional practice of Walwar (bride price), whereby marriage expenses are borne by the groom's family, creates economic challenges and often delays marriages. Combined with low literacy rates and limited awareness, these conditions affect women's ability to make informed marital decisions. A mixed-methods approach was employed. Primary data were collected from 60 rural women selected through random sampling using structured questionnaires, while 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted for qualitative insights. Secondary data were obtained from relevant books, reports, and scholarly literature. Findings revealed that approximately 81% of respondents had little or no participation in decisions concerning their marriages. Women's decision-making capacity was significantly associated with educational attainment and type of marriage. The study concludes that women's limited empowerment negatively affects family stability and social development. The study recommends increasing educational opportunities, awareness programs, and community-based interventions to strengthen women's participation in marital decision-making.*

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Marital Decision-Making, Walwar, Pashtun Society, Gender Equality, Balochistan.

**Introduction**

Women's empowerment has emerged as a significant social, economic, and developmental issue worldwide. Empowerment refers to the process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices and exercise control over decisions affecting their lives (Kabeer, 1999). In many developing countries, including Pakistan, women continue to face barriers in education, employment, property ownership, and participation in household and community decision-making (Upadhyay et al., 2014).

Balochistan, the largest province of Pakistan, is characterized by tribal social structures where traditional customs and cultural values strongly influence gender relations. In many rural areas, women actively contribute to agriculture, livestock management, and household responsibilities, yet their role in decision-making remains limited. This disparity is particularly evident in matters concerning marriage.

Sinjavi, located in District Ziarat, is predominantly inhabited by Pashtun tribes. One of the important cultural practices in the region is *Walwar*, a customary payment made by the groom or his family during marriage arrangements. Due to prolonged economic hardships, droughts, unemployment, and poverty, many families face difficulties in meeting these marriage-related expenses. Consequently, delays in marriages and social tensions have become common.

The increasing availability of mobile phones and social media has transformed social interactions among young people. In some cases, young men and women establish relationships independently and marry without parental consent. Such practices are often viewed negatively within the local cultural context and may result in conflicts between families. Community elders and *Jirga* institutions frequently intervene to resolve these disputes.

This study explores the relationship between women's empowerment and marital decision-making in Sinjavi and seeks to identify the factors that influence women's participation in decisions regarding marriage.

## **Literature Review**

### **Women and Empowerment**

Women's empowerment refers to enhancing women's ability to make decisions and exercise control over resources and life choices (Kabeer, 1999). Empowered women are better able to participate in household, social, and economic activities and contribute positively to community development (Samari, 2019).

According to Kishor and Subaiya (2005), women's empowerment can be measured through their participation in household decision-making, freedom of movement, and access to resources. Women who possess decision-making authority are more likely to improve their well-being and that of their families.

### **Women and Marital Decision-Making**

Marital decision-making is a crucial dimension of women's empowerment. Research indicates that women with higher educational attainment and greater autonomy are more likely to participate in decisions regarding marriage and family formation (Paul & Kumari, 2016).

In many traditional societies, marriage decisions are largely controlled by male family members. Such practices often restrict women's agency and limit their ability to choose their life partners.

### **Gender Equality and Development**

Gender equality contributes significantly to economic growth and social development. When women participate equally in decision-making, households experience improved welfare, better financial management, and enhanced educational outcomes for children (Albert & Escardíbul, 2017).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize gender equality as a prerequisite for sustainable development and poverty reduction (United Nations, 2015).

### **Women and Economic Development**

Women play an essential role in economic development through their contributions to agriculture, labor markets, and household production. Equal access to education and economic resources enhances productivity and improves living standards (Teresa & Gadisa, 2021).

In rural Pakistan, however, women's economic contributions often remain unrecognized despite their substantial involvement in agricultural activities.

## **Women in Pakistan**

Women in Pakistan continue to face inequalities in education, employment, political representation, and access to resources. These inequalities are particularly pronounced in rural and tribal areas where patriarchal norms limit women's opportunities and decision-making power (Neema, 2015).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it highlights the challenges faced by rural women in Sinjavi regarding marital decision-making. Despite their contributions to household and agricultural activities, women often remain excluded from decisions affecting their futures.

The study further contributes to understanding how poverty, lack of education, cultural traditions, and limited awareness interact to influence women's autonomy. Findings may assist policymakers, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders in designing interventions aimed at improving women's empowerment in rural Balochistan.

### **Research Objectives**

To examine the level of women's participation in marital decision-making in Sinjavi.

To assess the relationship between education and women's decision-making authority.

To explore the social consequences of limited female participation in marriage-related decisions.

### **Research Question**

**What are the major factors affecting women's empowerment regarding marital decision-making in Sinjavi, District Ziarat?**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The target population consisted of rural women residing in Sinjavi, District Ziarat, Balochistan. A sample of 60 women was selected through random sampling techniques to ensure representation of the target population.

#### **Data Collection**

##### **Primary & Secondary Data**

Primary data structured questionnaires, Semi-structured interviews, Three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)  
Secondary data academic journals, Books, Government reports, Research publications related to women empowerment and gender studies

#### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data from FGDs were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and perceptions regarding women's marital decision-making.

#### **Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Results**

To complement the survey findings, three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with rural women from different villages of Sinjavi. Each FGD consisted of 8–10 participants representing different age groups, marital statuses, and educational backgrounds. The discussions provided deeper insights into women's perceptions regarding marriage, empowerment, and decision-making.

### **Theme 1: Limited Participation in Marriage Decisions**

Participants consistently reported that marriage decisions are predominantly made by fathers, brothers, or other male elders. Most women stated that they were informed about their marriage arrangements only after the decision had already been finalized.

One participant remarked:

*"In our community, parents and elders decide about marriage. Girls usually do not have the opportunity to express their opinion openly."*

Another participant stated:

*"Even if a girl disagrees, it is difficult to challenge the decision because family honor is considered more important than her choice."*

These statements support the quantitative finding that approximately 81% of women had limited involvement in marital decision-making.

### **Theme 2: Lack of Education and Awareness**

Women identified illiteracy as one of the major barriers to empowerment. Participants believed that educated women are more capable of understanding their rights and communicating their preferences.

A participant explained:

*"Most women here are uneducated. They do not know what rights they have regarding marriage and family matters."*

Another respondent added:

*"If girls receive education, they can better understand the consequences of marriage decisions and can guide their children in the future."*

The discussions revealed a strong consensus that education is essential for increasing women's confidence and participation in family decisions.

### **Theme 3: Economic Challenges and the Practice of Walwar**

Participants emphasized that economic hardship and the traditional practice of Walwar significantly affect marriage arrangements. Many families face difficulties in meeting marriage-related expenses, resulting in delayed marriages.

One participant noted:

*"Many young men cannot afford Walwar because employment opportunities are limited. This creates problems for both families."*

Another woman observed:

*"Sometimes marriages are delayed for years because families cannot manage the required expenses."*

These findings suggest that economic factors influence not only marriage timing but also social relations within the community.

### **Theme 4: Influence of Mobile Phones and Social Media**

Women discussed the increasing use of mobile phones and social media among young people. Participants believed that technology has created new opportunities for communication but has also introduced challenges to traditional social norms.

One participant stated:

*"Young boys and girls communicate through mobile phones. Sometimes families become aware of relationships only after problems arise."*

Another respondent commented:

*"Social media has changed the thinking of the younger generation. They are more aware of the outside world than previous generations."*

Participants expressed mixed opinions, recognizing both the positive role of technology in spreading information and its potential to create conflicts with traditional practices.

#### **Theme 5: Women's Economic Contribution but Limited Authority**

Most participants highlighted that women actively contribute to agricultural work, livestock management, and household responsibilities. Despite these contributions, they reported having little influence over important family decisions.

A participant shared:

*"Women work in the fields alongside men, but major decisions are still taken by men."*

Another woman explained:

*"We contribute to family income, but our opinions are often not considered when decisions are made."*

This theme illustrates the gap between women's economic participation and their decision-making power.

#### **Theme 6: Need for Awareness and Community Support**

Participants strongly recommended awareness programs focusing on women's rights, education, and family decision-making. They believed that change is possible if community elders, religious leaders, and educational institutions support women's empowerment.

One participant remarked:

*"If awareness programs are conducted in villages, women will learn about their rights and responsibilities."*

Another respondent stated:

*"Community leaders should encourage families to listen to women's opinions, especially regarding marriage."*

#### **Discussion/Findings**

The findings of the present study reveal a significant lack of women's participation in marital decision-making in Sinjavi, District Ziarat. The quantitative results indicate that approximately 81% of respondents had little or no authority in decisions related to their marriages. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on women's empowerment in Pakistan and other developing societies, where patriarchal social structures often limit women's autonomy in personal and family matters (Kabeer, 1999; Kishor & Subaiya, 2005). The low level of women's involvement in marital decision-making can largely be attributed to limited educational opportunities. The study found that women with higher levels of education demonstrated greater confidence and awareness regarding their marital rights and future aspirations. This finding supports the argument of Samari (2019), who stated that education enhances women's agency, self-confidence, and capacity to make informed decisions about their lives. Similarly, Upadhyay et al. (2014) emphasized that education serves as one of the strongest predictors of women's empowerment, enabling them to participate more effectively in household and reproductive decisions. In the context of Sinjavi, where female literacy remains low, educational deprivation continues to reinforce women's dependence on male family members for major life decisions. Another important finding concerns the influence of cultural norms and tribal traditions on women's empowerment. The Pashtun social structure in Sinjavi is characterized by strong patriarchal values, where family honor and collective decision-making often take precedence over individual preferences. Marriage is generally considered a family matter rather than a personal choice. Consequently, fathers, brothers, and elders typically play the dominant role in selecting marriage partners. These findings align with the observations of Neema (2015), who argued that women in Pakistan, particularly in rural and tribal regions, experience greater restrictions on personal autonomy due to deeply rooted cultural norms

and gender hierarchies. The practice of Walwar emerged as another significant factor affecting marital decision-making. Traditionally, Walwar involves financial payments or expenditures associated with marriage that are borne by the groom or his family. Participants reported that increasing economic hardships, unemployment, and prolonged drought conditions have made it difficult for many families to fulfill these financial obligations. As a result, marriages are often delayed, creating frustration among young men and women. The findings suggest that economic barriers contribute indirectly to social tensions and changing marriage patterns. According to Teresa and Gadisa (2021), economic constraints frequently limit social mobility and reduce opportunities for individuals to exercise personal choices, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities. In Sinjavi, the burden of Walwar appears to influence not only marriage arrangements but also broader perceptions regarding women's roles and rights. The qualitative findings further revealed concerns regarding the increasing influence of social media and mobile technology on interpersonal relationships among young people. Participants noted that greater access to mobile phones has increased communication between young men and women. While technology offers opportunities for information sharing and social interaction, many respondents believed that inadequate awareness and guidance have contributed to relationships that challenge traditional norms. These findings may be understood within the framework of social change theory, which suggests that modernization and technological advancement often transform traditional social institutions and patterns of behavior (Giddens, 2006). The conflict observed between traditional marriage customs and emerging forms of social interaction reflects broader processes of social transformation occurring in rural Pakistan. The study also highlights the relationship between women's empowerment and community development. Women in Sinjavi actively participate in agricultural activities, livestock management, household labor, and childcare. Despite their substantial contributions to family welfare and local economic activities, their voices remain largely excluded from important decisions affecting their lives. This finding supports the work of Kabutiei (2013), who argued that societies achieve greater social and economic development when women actively participate in decision-making processes. Similarly, Albert and Escardibul (2017) found that households characterized by shared decision-making between men and women tend to experience better economic outcomes and improved family welfare. An important sociological implication of the findings is the persistence of gender inequality despite women's economic contributions. The study demonstrates that economic participation alone does not automatically lead to empowerment. Women may contribute significantly to household income and agricultural production while remaining excluded from decisions concerning marriage, education, and mobility. This observation supports Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of empowerment as involving not only access to resources but also agency and achievements. In Sinjavi, women possess limited agency despite their productive contributions, indicating the need for broader structural changes beyond economic participation alone. The role of the Jirga system also emerged as a significant theme during qualitative discussions. Participants reported that community elders often intervene to resolve disputes related to marriages and family conflicts. While the Jirga system serves as an important mechanism for maintaining social order, its decisions are generally influenced by traditional norms that may not always prioritize women's perspectives. Previous studies on tribal governance systems in Pakistan have similarly noted that women are rarely represented in traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms, limiting their ability to advocate for their interests (Ali & Khan, 2018). Therefore, efforts to strengthen women's empowerment should also encourage greater inclusion of women's voices in community-level decision-making forums. Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of awareness regarding legal and religious rights

related to marriage. Many respondents reported limited knowledge about their rights to consent in marriage and participate in decisions concerning their future. Islamic teachings emphasize the necessity of obtaining a woman's consent before marriage; however, cultural practices sometimes overshadow religious principles. Awareness campaigns involving educators, religious scholars, and community leaders may therefore play an important role in addressing misconceptions and promoting informed decision-making among women. Overall, the findings demonstrate that women's limited participation in marital decision-making is shaped by a combination of educational, economic, cultural, and structural factors. The issue cannot be addressed through a single intervention. Rather, a comprehensive approach involving education, economic empowerment, awareness programs, community engagement, and policy support is required. Enhancing women's decision-making capacity will not only improve individual well-being but also contribute to broader social development, gender equality, and sustainable community progress in Sinjavi and similar rural areas of Balochistan.

### **Recommendations/Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that greater attention be given to female education and awareness in rural areas of Sinjavi. Educational opportunities and literacy programs should be expanded to help women understand their rights and participate effectively in marital decision-making. Community awareness sessions involving parents, religious scholars, tribal elders, and Jirga members should be conducted to promote the importance of women's consent and participation in marriage-related decisions. Efforts should also be made to reduce the economic burden of Walwar and encourage simple marriage practices. Furthermore, vocational training and income-generating opportunities should be provided to enhance women's economic independence and confidence. Government agencies, NGOs, and community leaders should work together to create an environment where women can actively contribute to decisions affecting their lives, thereby promoting gender equality, family well-being, and sustainable social development in Sinjavi.

The study concludes that women in Sinjavi remain significantly underrepresented in marital decision-making processes. Limited educational opportunities, economic hardships, traditional cultural practices, and low awareness collectively restrict women's autonomy. The findings demonstrate that empowering women through education and awareness can positively influence their participation in decisions affecting their lives.

Strengthening women's decision-making capacity is not only beneficial for individuals but also contributes to social stability, family welfare, and community development.

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