

Journal of Religion & Society (JR&S)

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>

Print ISSN: 3006-1296 Online ISSN: 3006-130X

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19699293>

Women's Agency in Feudal Sindh: Ambivalent Negotiations of Honor, Patriarchy, and Everyday Resistance

Benazeer Chandio

Doctor of Philosophy English Literature, National College of Business Administration & Economics, (Alhamra University) Multan Sub-Campus
benazirchandio360@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper will provide a critical analysis of how women in feudal zones in Sindh, Pakistan, utilize their agency in societies where systems of honor, patriarchy, and socio-economic control prevail. Through semi-structured interviews with fifteen women in rural Sindh, this qualitative study will use interpretivist to analyze how women negotiate their agency in contexts of constriction. The study is based on an interpretive, rather than representative, sample, providing unique and context-specific insight into how agency is performed when constrained by structural circumstances. The theoretical frameworks used for the interpretation include feminist theories, postcolonial feminism, everyday resistance, and patriarchal bargaining. It is shown that women perform their agency through the use of strategic conformity, indirect decisions, emotional work, and reinterpretation of honor. However, another dimension becomes apparent, whereby some of the agency strategies that women employ help maintain patriarchal structures. In the process of developing an understanding of the latter, the concept of ambivalent agency will be introduced. Moreover, highly publicized cases are studied as discourses creating fear within, risk perceptions, and normative boundaries of appropriate feminine behavior. Thus, by addressing these processes, the research does not fall into the trap of the simplistic dichotomy of either being a victim or a resistor. The research will make a theoretical contribution to the literature on feminism through the provision of an insightful contextual understanding of the notion of agency within feudal societies.

Keywords: *Women's Agency, Feudalism, Honor Culture, Sindh, Ambivalent Agency, Everyday Resistance, Patriarchal Bargaining.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of feudalism is still strongly felt in the socio-political and economic systems of rural Pakistan, especially in the province of Sindh, where land tenure and patronage systems have been deeply embedded throughout history. Feudalism is not just an

economic arrangement; rather, it represents a wider social system that governs issues of authority, hierarchy, and human interaction. The large landowners, who are popularly known as waderas, wield immense power over the land, labor, and politics in the region, acting as intermediaries between the government and the rural populace. As pointed out by Gazdar (2007), this system sustains asymmetric power dynamics, which go far beyond mere economic dependence to encompass social and political domination. According to Shah (2016), the feudal elite enjoys sovereignty over many rural communities, playing a significant role in legal matters, election processes, and conflict resolution.

This structure of hierarchy's places gender relations firmly within structures of control that target women. Women within the feudal system in Sindh are placed between patriarchy, social hierarchy, and the traditional practice of authority; thus, their position renders them highly vulnerable to control and surveillance. Women's behavior is governed by socially prescribed codes of conduct that emphasize obedience, humility, and the maintaining of honor within the family. These are not merely codes, but rather, they serve as means of control that regulate women's physical and social movement (Kandiyoti, 1988; Khan, 2018).

The concept of honor is one of the key organizing principles in South Asian societies; it acts as an important means of ensuring that patriarchal society continues to operate as such. Honor is linked to the behavior of women, especially their sexual activity, marital status, and level of exposure to the public domain. In turn, this makes the body of the woman a tool that embodies the reputation of the family or community. Violation of honor can be punished severely; examples include forced marriage, banishment from the community, and honor killings. Hundreds of women reportedly die annually in Pakistan on charges of having violated the concept of honor; these crimes take place mostly in rural areas of Sindh province (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2023). It is also important to note that parallel justice systems, like jirgas and panchayats, contribute to legitimizing honor killings, interpreting them as a culture-specific response to immorality (Amnesty International, 2019). In addition to weakening legal structures, such informal organizations support feudal and patriarchal.

Even in the face of such harsh realities, mainstream academic discourses have tended to depict women living under feudalism and rural conditions in a predominantly negative manner as either passive or active victims of subordination. The pioneering research

conducted by Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987) on the situation of women in Pakistan and subsequent research work done by Ali et al. (2012) have been invaluable in highlighting systematic discrimination and acts of violence against women. Nevertheless, such analyses tend to reduce women's experiences to a simplistic framework that either views them as victims of their circumstances or as agents of change.

To address the shortcomings of such approaches, more contemporary feminist research has focused on exploring agency as an idea which is situated within its particular social and cultural contexts. In this regard, Mahmood (2005) criticizes the liberal feminist perspective, which holds that the practice of agency necessarily implies some form of resistance or liberation, as it may also involve other forms, such as accommodation and negotiation. Under certain circumstances, people can use their agency not in order to resist oppressive structures but by complying with them.

The application of this approach to feudal Sindh leads to the understanding that the forms of agency for women are often hidden and indirect. In other words, women may influence decisions at the household level in an informal manner; use strategic compliance to create leverage in their favor; or, in general, reframe the existing cultural norms in order to open up areas where they have freedom to act. For instance, in this regard, the theory of 'patriarchal bargain' developed by Kandiyoti (1988) is rather pertinent. However, in spite of the usefulness that the application of such strategies has in certain cases, it must be mentioned that these practices remain ambivalent.

This ambivalence defines the starting point of the current investigation. In contrast to the view of agency as a linear or emancipatory endeavor, this research understands agency as a dynamic concept that consists of practices defined by various systems of power relations. Women's agency cannot be separated from the socio-cultural and economic contexts within which it exists. According to Mohanty (1988), the attempt to create an image of a uniform 'Third World woman' would result in the loss of particularities inherent to their situations. Thus, a contextualized and self-reflective approach is necessary to understand how women act and interact within hierarchies of honor, patriarchy, and control.

In this respect, the present research is designed to contribute to existing scholarship about agency in relation to Third World women. By analyzing how women in feudal Sindh construct their agency in daily life, the present research contributes new

knowledge through interpretive analysis of the data collected from 15 participants residing in three rural districts of Sindh Province. The objective of this research was not to produce any generalizable information; rather, it sought to explore the complexity of women's interactions with systems of power in the course of their routine activities.

In this regard, this study follows postcolonial feminist perspectives on how the significance of local knowledge should be highlighted while overcoming binary thinking in the analysis of gender issues. In other words, through highlighting women's voices, it attempts to question the dominant narrative and acknowledge the ability of women to negotiate, transform, and sometimes reinforce socio-cultural structures they inhabit. At the end of the day, this project seeks to offer a complex perspective on the gender dynamics of feudal Sindh by addressing such aspects as power, resistance, and agency.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study will be driven by several related objectives that will serve as a basis for an insightful critical analysis of the intricate interactions between gender, power, and social organization within feudal Sindh.

1. To analyze the understanding and perception of honor among women in feudal Sindh

Firstly, the study will attempt to investigate the understanding and perception of the term 'honor' among the women living in feudal Sindh. Unlike other studies that regard honor as a static aspect of culture, this objective views it as a socially constructed and negotiated construct that influences women's experiences and vice versa.

2. To investigate the mechanisms of control within feudal and patriarchal societies.

Secondly, the study will investigate the mechanisms of control within feudal and patriarchal societies. Instead of limiting the investigation to coercive mechanisms, the study will also focus on less obvious ways in which control is exerted. This includes restrictions to movement, decision-making processes, and resource acquisition.

3. To examine the daily tactics employed by women in their pursuit of agency.

Thirdly, the study seeks to examine the daily tactics employed by women in their pursuit of agency in these conditions. Rethinking resistance as not just open opposition but also includes negotiation and other forms of agency, this goal involves an examination of

the daily tactics employed by women to secure a measure of autonomy.

4. To theorize the complex consequences of agency, which may include the unintentional consolidation of patriarchal power relations.

Lastly, the study seeks to theorize the complex consequences of agency. Critically assessing the role played by women in enabling their empowerment at the cost of reproducing the same patriarchal and feudal system, this goal is especially significant for theoretical discourse on agency, as it emphasizes its often contradictory and non-linear nature.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the stated objectives, the following research questions will guide this research:

1. How do women in feudal Sindh manage to exercise agency in an environment that is characterized by honor and patriarchy?

The main concern of this question is how structural barriers are navigated in terms of their lived realities and practices.

2. What are some of the visible as well as invisible acts of resistance practiced by the women?

In this research question, there is a focus on resistance and its different modes including both visible and invisible acts.

3. What is meant by honor? How is it defined, upheld, and contested?

This research question looks at the idea of honor as a socially produced concept, how it is upheld and contested.

4. Under what conditions can women's agency lead to structural change as against structural reinforcement?

This question tackles the core issue in the research the possibility of transformation and reinforcement of structure through women's agency.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on gender, power, and hierarchy in Pakistan has come a long way in the past few decades. The earliest studies mostly involved highlighting women's oppression and subjugation in patriarchal societies. Economic dependence, restrictions on movement, and gender-based violence were some of the most common topics for research in the early literature on women's marginalization in patriarchal society (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Although these studies played an instrumental role in drawing attention towards various structural constraints faced by women, their tendency to present women as mere victims of oppression was quite problematic.

Recent scholarship on the topic has adopted a much more sophisticated approach. Researchers have shifted their focus from analyzing how oppressive structures affect women to studying how women negotiate and resist these very structures. Utilizing perspectives and theories from different fields, including sociology, anthropology, and postcolonial feminism, scholars now seek to understand how women exercise agency in the context of patriarchal power structures (Mahmood, 2005; Kandiyoti, 1988). In doing so, they challenge traditional notions of power and oppression, which were typically associated with repression.

Within the developing literature in this regard, one such important area of study is the feudal society of Sindh. The combination of factors like feudalism, patriarchy, and social culture results in a socially very hierarchical society where there are complex processes of negotiation around gender relations. Any analysis of this phenomenon needs to move away from the simplistic dualism of dominance and resistance to recognize the complexities involved in such processes.

2.1 Feudalism, Patriarchy, and Gendered Power in Sindh

The links between feudalism, patriarchy, and gendered power in the Pakistani province of Sindh have attracted much attention from sociologists, anthropologists, feminists, and human rights activists in recent years. In this connection, feudalism is not only the economic practice whereby land owners control the land, but also a wider social system of hierarchical dependencies (Gazdar, 2007; Shah, 2016). Waderas (big landowners) exert extensive influence on tenants and laborers, who are controlled socially, politically, legally, and economically (ibid.).

In this system, patriarchal relations exist as part of the process that legitimizes domination by males. In particular, women are considered members of the private sector whose main task is the preservation of family izzat and adherence to traditional rules of female behavior. Such systems, according to Kandiyoti (1988), create 'patriarchal bargains,' i.e., agreements whereby women may agree to observe certain restrictions in order to receive certain advantages. This, of course, contributes to the persistence of patriarchal traditions in society.

The control over women's bodies and activities is especially prominent in rural Sindh. Practices such as child marriage, educational prohibitions, and restriction on mobility are used as tools for the protection of the family honor. However, these traditions are not only accepted culturally but also supported by such non-formal institutions as jirgas and panchayats that work

parallel to or instead of the official legal system (Amnesty International, 2019). These entities can use gender-based violence, such as honor killings, as means to maintain social stability.

Empirical research shows that these trends remain very persistent. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP, 2023), there were 385 cases of honor killings registered in Pakistan in 2022, the majority of which happened in rural Sindh. The actual numbers might be even higher due to underreporting and stigma associated with honor killings. These facts suggest that the feudal-patriarchal power structures are quite resilient to the social and political changes.

On the other hand, the new studies indicate that women in these settings do not only play victim roles but are active agents involved in the process of negotiating their places. Using different tactics both direct and indirect, they cope with the situation, make concessions, try to change the outcomes, and achieve some freedom from oppression. Nevertheless, as argued by Mahmood (2005), agency should always be interpreted within the cultural and social context where it occurs because it does not refer to universal ideas of opposition or empowerment.

Therefore, the main point here is that there are complex interrelations between the constraints imposed on women in terms of their structural position and what women feel, think, experience, and do. This contradiction represents the background for the current study aimed at contributing to discussions about this issue.

2.2 Feudal Structures and the Production of Gendered Inequality

The system of Feudalism prevalent in Sindh, therefore, has its historical antecedents in the land policies adopted during colonial times that involved consolidation of large chunks of land holdings in the hands of relatively few wealthy elite families. Colonial measures such as land settlement and the system of zamindaris have resulted in the emergence of a system of skewed land ownership that has influenced socio-political relations even in present times (Gazdar, 2007). The inequality entrenched in this historically established system has gone beyond the colonial period and transformed into one in which economic strength is linked to political influence and social dominance.

As argued by Shah (2016), feudal lords act as local sovereigns in their respective areas having control over political processes as well as over dispute resolution and administrative processes. However, feudalism is not merely an economic system but has evolved into an embedded system of domination wherein patrons exert a

certain degree of influence over their clients or vassals. The relationship of tenancy and labor is characterized by dependencies wherein both women and men depend upon the landlord for survival as well as for protection and justice.

The confluence of feudalism and patriarchy gives rise to the phenomenon of 'compound subordination,' according to Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987), whereby women are subjected to oppression not only as household members who belong to economically dependent families but also as individuals governed by patriarchal rules. The responsibilities of women are restricted primarily to domestic work and reproduction, which means that they have no access to education and employment opportunities or to personal agency in decision-making. Additionally, the feudal ruling class has an informal grip on the functioning of the state machinery, such as the police and the courts, which results in uneven enforcement of laws and unequal access to justice (HRCP, 2023).

2.3 Honor (*Izzat*) as a Mechanism of Social Control

Honor (*izzat*) can be considered one of the organizing concepts of patriarchal South Asian societies within the feudal and tribal structure of communities. Contrary to individual-based dignity, honor is a social value associated with the morality of the whole family or community (Khan, 2018). It should be noted that women play an important role in this conceptual framework, because their behavior, especially regarding sexual, marital, and social aspects, is regarded as the main aspect of the family honor.

It is claimed that the concept of honor acts as a tool for social control over women's mobility and interaction. Thus, according to Kandiyoti (1988), such mechanisms are based on both the external control and the internalization of behavioral patterns, which makes this process visible and invisible simultaneously. Women are socialized in these traditions and norms that become obligatory for them.

Violations of honor, real or imagined, may result in serious repercussions, which include forced marriages, social exclusion, and different types of violence. The critical thing to note here is that honor-related violence is neither accidental nor an anomaly; it is institutionally rooted in patriarchal systems. Statistics clearly highlight the prevalence of this issue. There are thousands of instances of honor killing recorded in Pakistan, especially within recent decades, and most of those affected are women (Chesler, 2010; HRCP, 2023). Such violence is typically committed by relatives, indicating the personal and relational aspect of honor-related violence.

Moreover, the legal and institutional response to honor-related crimes is insufficient. The conviction rate for such crimes is very low, often because of social pressure, settlement outside the courtroom, and gaps in laws (HRCP, 2023). In this way, women become more susceptible to violence to restore honor, thus creating a cycle of fear and control among women.

2.4 Informal Justice Systems and the Reinforcement of Patriarchy

Informal judicial mechanisms like the jirga and panchayat are pivotal for upholding the power dynamics in the rural region of Sindh. These informal institutions do not fall within any legal structure yet carry weight among the communities themselves. Generally comprising the elite, including the feudal lords themselves, the jirga/panchayat deliberates on matters pertaining to property, matrimony, and social behavior.

Scholarship reveals that the decision-making mechanisms prevalent in such structures usually endorse certain acts that contravene women's rights, such as forced marriages, exchange marriages (watta satta), and honor killings (HRCP, 2023). While the decisions arrived at through these processes are defended under the guise of community peace or traditionalism, they actually perpetuate the existing gender power relations.

For example, Amnesty International (2019) reports on cases in which tribal councils authorize severe measures like murdering couples whose marriage was conducted outside the permission of the families. It is clear that the existence of customary laws still plays a key role in maintaining control over personal affairs and ensuring that people conform to patriarchal values. As is illustrated in Jacoby and Mansuri (2010), practices like the transfer of wives ensure women's continued oppression.

The existence of both formal and informal justice systems contributes to inconsistencies regarding the protection of women's rights. Informal systems usually prevail over the formal ones in many instances, especially in rural settings where the influence of the state is weak. The existence of both kinds of systems helps to maintain patriarchal oppression of women through the establishment of socially accepted methods of monitoring their actions

2.5 Women's Agency: Negotiation within Constraints

Although structural approaches have emphasized the omnipresence of oppression, recent feminist scholarship demands a more sophisticated approach towards the notion of agency of women in oppressive conditions. According to Mahmood (2005),

while liberal feminist theories emphasize the connection between resistance and agency, a more sophisticated approach to agency should take into consideration its contextuality and cultural mediation. Within oppressive societies, an individual may find ways to achieve some form of personal agency without openly opposing the oppressive system.

Within feudal Sindh, women's agency takes place in less direct and covert ways. Such agency includes the use of strategic conformity, the employment of emotional tactics within familial structures, and indirect involvement in the decision-making process. Women in feudal Sindh also utilize informal networks of support in order to obtain agency.

The concept of everyday resistance, proposed by Scott (1985), can help to comprehend these practices better. By means of avoiding open conflicts, people can engage in everyday resistance through such actions as remaining silent, delaying their actions, or demonstrating symbolic defiance. Another theoretical perspective on oppressed people's behavior is that of Kandiyoti (1988) and her idea of patriarchal bargaining, which implies making calculated choices under oppression to ensure safety and benefit.

Most importantly, according to Kabeer (1999), agency must be seen in terms of resource endowment. In other words, agency is neither universal nor unconditional, but rather situational. Using this theoretical background, the research seeks to define agency among the women in feudal Sindh as an ambivalent concept that is able both to facilitate some empowerment and contribute to oppression at the same time.

2.6 Case Studies as Discursive Events

Prominent examples of gender-based violence in Pakistan do not simply act as standalone events but as discursive incidents, which help create a common narrative about gender norms, risks, and acceptability. These incidents are communicated via media discourses, public discourses, and community dialogues, which affect the perception that women have of their limits of autonomy and resistance.

One such prominent example is the assassination of Qandeel Baloch in 2016. As an internet personality, Qandeel was outspoken about her opposition to the norms of modesty for females in Pakistani society. The incident, in which she was killed by her own brother to restore family honor, was extensively covered in the media. This coverage usually portrayed her as both a victim and a moral perpetrator, thus helping set limits on appropriate female behavior (Warraich, 2016).

Likewise, the case of Umme Rubab Chandio demonstrates the weaknesses of formal legal processes in dealing with violence associated with feudal systems. After the قتل (murder) of her relatives, which was claimed to involve the involvement of powerful figures from the feudal society, Chandio took the issue to court, an act that made headlines at the national level. The subsequent acquittal of the accused persons, as recorded by HRC (2021), further confirmed the existence of structural impunity in the society.

In this study, however, the selected cases cannot be considered as being representative of any phenomenon. Rather, they can be viewed as discursive events, which help to create a certain perception of the risks and opportunities for women.

2.8 Critical Gaps in Contemporary Literature

Although numerous studies have been done concerning gender and violence in Pakistan, some important gaps need to be filled. First of all, it is noteworthy that many studies continue to be preoccupied with victimological narratives that highlight oppression and sufferings of women while underplaying their strategic capacities and negotiation abilities (Ali et al., 2012). Such an approach can lead to re-production of stereotypical images that cannot fully reflect complex reality of women's lives.

The second gap refers to the lack of context-specific qualitative research that would focus on cases of gender-based violence in rural and feudal areas of Sindh. Many studies, which do not pay adequate attention to this topic, consider a national level or an urban setting as an analytical framework for their analyses.

Another gap that needs to be filled concerns the absence of studies that would analyze high-profile cases as a discourse that influences perceptions and social norms. Most studies tend to use cases as examples rather than analyze them from the point of view of discourse theory.

Finally, although the ambivalence of agency is increasingly recognized in recent scholarly literature, this concept does not receive critical attention in most studies that are preoccupied with women's agency despite restrictions.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

To appreciate women's agency in relation to the hierarchical feudal system in Sindh, an analytical perspective must be developed that goes beyond reductive approaches such as oppression and resistance. In societies that are rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal in nature, power is exercised in terms of cultural mores, economic relationships, and institutional mechanisms,

rendering agency complex, multi-faceted, sometimes elusive, and inherently ambivalent in nature. The present study uses a three-dimensional theoretical framework: 'Patriarchal Bargaining' (Kandiyoti, 1988); 'Agency Within Submission' (Mahmood, 2005); and 'Everyday Resistance' (Scott, 1985). Postcolonial Feminism (Mohanty, 1988) informs the overall perspective of the inquiry.

Patriarchal Bargaining: Strategic Adaptation within Constraint

The concept of 'Patriarchal Bargaining' put forth by Kandiyoti (1988) lies at the heart of this analysis. According to Kandiyoti, women are neither victims nor pawns in the hands of patriarchy but rather active participants in defining their status and identity. In order to achieve security and well-being, women often employ strategies that reinforce patriarchal structures by entering into arranged marriages for economic protection, complying with cultural norms for social acceptance, and exercising limited control within the household.

This approach is important because it does not construe conformity as submission or acquiescence. In fact, a woman who conforms to patriarchal ideology may have rationalized her actions for self-protection. Yet, as this research will further show, the practice of patriarchal bargaining cannot be seen merely as an empowering strategy because such strategies are likely to solidify the patriarchal structure itself—something called Ambivalent Agency by this research.

Agency within Submission: Rethinking Resistance

However, Mahmood (2005) presents an altogether different critique of feminist conceptions of agency. According to Mahmood, who relies heavily on ethnography of piety movements among Egyptian women, women may develop the habit of modesty, obedience, and piety. In fact, this practice can be considered a meaningful exercise in self-making rather than forced obedience.

In the feudal society of Sindh, Mahmood's theoretical framework helps the researcher to identify acts of agency in actions that could have been easily dismissed as compliance. For example, when a woman decides to veil, speak quietly, or stay away from public spaces, she may be engaging in an act of culturally mediated agency that has little to do with submission or coercion. Nonetheless, Mahmood's theory has been subjected to criticism for its tendency to romanticize submission. Consequently, Mahmood is applied in opposition to Kandiyoti in the present study.

Everyday Resistance: Covert Opposition

According to Scott (1985), 'everyday resistance' is the form of resistance carried out by dominated people by means of subtle and usually hidden actions, including delay tactics, silence, anonymity, symbolization of defiance, and noncompliance. Everyday resistance becomes the dominant form of protest when operating in highly repressive political systems where overt resistance would lead to harsh punishments.

In feudal Sindh, examples of everyday resistance include delayed compliance with decisions, use of intermediaries in influencing events, silent dissent in response to certain situations, and secret support of women's decision-making. As opposed to Mahmood's framework, which emphasizes the element of agency in resistance, Scott's approach emphasizes the very essence of opposition even when carried out through subtle means. The present research combines the two approaches in conversation, acknowledging that a woman's actions may fall anywhere on the spectrum between opposition, adaptation (Kandiyoti's approach), and self-forming (Mahmood's).

Postcolonial Feminism as Orienting Lens

Although all the three approaches mentioned above offer analytical perspectives, postcolonial feminism by Mohanty (1988) provides a framework of orientation that is critical of Western-centrism regarding empowerment. In her discussion, Mohanty observes that Third World women have been viewed as passive victims without considering their heterogeneous experiences and culturally defined agency. For this reason, this research does not attempt to project its own definition of empowerment, but rather considers women's actions according to the logic of the culture of feudal Sindh.

Integrating the Theoretical Core

They are connected as follows:

- Kandiyoti (1988) provides an understanding of the rational calculation made by women in patriarchy for survival (strategic adaptation).
- Mahmood (2005) explains how agency can emerge from submission (self-making through valued social norms).
- Scott (1985) identifies conditions under which covert action becomes necessary (in cases when open resistance cannot be used).

These three frameworks are not seen as conflicting perspectives within the research but rather serve as different perspectives on the same topic – complementary tools for analyzing women's experiences. For example, the experience of one and the same

woman may involve patriarchal bargain (entering into an arranged marriage for safety), self-making through submission (being proud of being a modest daughter-in-law), and resistance.

Conceptual Model: Ambivalent Agency as Structural Condition

The conceptually based framework used to conduct this study can be summarized as follows. The feudal system, patriarchy, and codes of honor create certain constraints within which women operate in terms of their mobility, decision-making, and autonomy. In response to such constraints, women develop certain behaviors and tactics of negotiation, compliance, and resistance. The result is the creation of various forms of agency that can manifest themselves both visibly and invisibly, oppositionally and adaptively. Importantly, though, women's agency has always been ambivalent because, while giving women certain advantages in the short run (such as control over education of their children), it can at the same time reinforce patriarchal relations (because it allows maintaining harmony in the household without questioning the role of men there).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

In order to understand how women living in the feudal zones of Sindh operate within these honor-based systems of patriarchy and socio-economic subordination, this study uses a qualitative, interpretivist approach. The use of an interpretivist perspective is very apt in this case because this approach emphasizes the subjective interpretation of the meanings people construct from their experiences; that is, the reality they construct through these interpretations is socially contextualized (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The phenomenological framework is another aspect of the theoretical lens used in this study. Since phenomenology takes into account the experiences of people as their primary source of knowledge, it is useful in analyzing how certain concepts can affect individual experiences. In the same way, a phenomenological approach will be useful in investigating how concepts such as honor, control, and agency can affect women living under a feudal system.

It should be noted that the research does not seek to establish its statistical representative nature. On the contrary, it aims to provide context-specific interpretive conclusions from the data gathered from a relatively small, yet carefully chosen sample. The purpose is not to make generalizations about all women from the province of Sindh, but to explore the complex processes of negotiation of agency in a certain socio-cultural context.

3.2 Research Setting

The study was carried out in three rural districts of Sindh: Khairpur, Sanghar, and Mirpur Khas. The selection of these districts was purposeful because of the *استمرار* (persistence) of the feudal system, which still influences the socio-economic and political dynamics of these areas. Large farms are owned by the feudal lords (waderas), who create dependency systems that impact access to resources and jobs.

Kinship groups are an important social organization form in these communities and often overlap with feudalism, making social hierarchies more prominent. Informal courts, such as jirgas, are significant dispute-solving mechanisms and work either alongside or instead of official legal procedures. Education, health care, and legal assistance are inaccessible, especially for women, reducing their potential to challenge the status quo.

Hence, this region is ideal for studying the process of production, maintenance, and negotiation of gender power dynamics in the feudal system. The selection of various districts offers diversity while ensuring a common context.

3.3 Participants and Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used in the study, a technique of selecting participants for qualitative research that entails identifying cases rich in information (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria included the following: (a) women aged 18 and above, (b) at least 10-year residence in rural Sindh, (c) experience living within the confines of feudal and patriarchal household relations, and (d) voluntary participation.

Fifteen participants took part in the study. Sample sizes in qualitative research are usually smaller compared to quantitative research because quality trumps quantity. According to Guest et al. (2006), data saturation (point at which no new themes emerge) can frequently be reached with 12 to 15 interviews in homogenous samples.

In terms of age, participants were between 22 and 52 years old, indicating that they belonged to various developmental stages and experiences. In terms of educational background, four participants had no education, six attained primary level, and five were educated up to secondary level. In addition, all participants were situated within feudal socio-economic structures whereby households of the participants belonged either directly dependent upon or subservient to the wadera. Regarding marital status, ten of the participants were married, two were widows, one was divorced, and two were unmarried participants.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Interviews were the main means of data gathering and have been found to be effective for understanding complicated issues. Interviews allow for some flexibility in asking questions, which gives the participants the opportunity to narrate their story within their own framework but still in a systematic manner.

The time period of each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and took place in the native tongue of the respondent (either Sindhi or Urdu). In choosing the gender of the interviewer, preference was given to a female interviewer in order to make the respondent feel more comfortable.

An interview guide was created to address important issues such as:

- Concepts of honor (izzat)
- Daily constraints and controls
- Household decision-making processes
- Coping mechanisms and negotiation tactics
- Methods of overt and covert resistance

Interviews were recorded audibly with prior permission from the participants, providing precise data collection. Apart from qualitative data, secondary data sources were considered in the study, which included reports from Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) (2019-2023), case studies on violence against women based on honor, and legal documentation in relation to the case of Umme Rubab Chandio.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

The data gathering process was systematically conducted in order to guarantee that the study's quality and integrity were not compromised, as well as the safety of the participants involved. First, access to the participants was gained through the help of two local women's networks—the Sindh Rural Women's Network and the Aurat Foundation.

Once the respondents were recruited, their consent to participate was secured in writing before conducting any interview. The interviews were conducted in private settings and in safe locations, usually in their houses at times when male relatives were not around to avoid any possible monitoring.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim for authenticity purposes. For those who gave accounts in their native language—either Sindhi or Urdu—their responses were translated into English via back-translation.

3.6 Ethical Approval and Contextualized Ethics

However, acknowledging that ethics alone cannot be proceduralized in situations of power imbalances and potential retaliation, a context-based approach to ethical considerations was taken into account.

First of all, a detailed risk analysis was done in cooperation with the local NGOs in order to assess possible dangers to the respondents. In view of numerous cases of feudal retaliation towards those who cooperate with outsiders, recruitment was limited to reliable circles and interviews took place under conditions that posed minimal risks.

Secondly, emotional safety procedures were introduced as well. Interviewers were taught how to respond to signs of distress and were made aware that participants could skip certain questions or stop the interview altogether. Finally, there was a local female counselor ready to intervene during the research process.

Limitations include the bias that might come from NGO gatekeeping. People who are associated with the NGOs could have more knowledge of their rights and hence be more ready to share their stories of empowerment. Rather than viewing such a situation as a weakness, the study acknowledges its existence and considers its effect on the نوع (nature) of the data obtained.

Lastly, confidentiality was not limited to the use of pseudonyms. In the case of rural areas, where there are few people, the participants' villages were anonymized, but they were given information regarding possible dangers that they might encounter by taking part in the study.

3.7 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used as the approach for the study in line with Braun and Clarke (2006)'s description of the same approach. This approach is appropriate in interpretivist studies since it involves analyzing patterns within qualitative data as well as recognizing that the researcher actively participates in meaning-making process.

Six phases guided the process of analysis which include (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding the data, (c) searching for patterns within data, (d) reviewing and refining identified patterns, (e) naming themes and defining themes, and (f) producing the report. Inductive coding guided the theme emergence process.

To increase the reliability of the process of analysis, inter-researcher agreement was achieved in 85% of cases when two independent researchers analyzed 20% of the sample size (the transcripts).

3.8 Trustworthiness and Rigor

In this study, the credibility of the study will be guaranteed using the approach of Lincoln and Guba (1985). The credibility of the study will be ensured by prolonged engagement in the field, participant validation, and triangulation. The participants have been provided the chance to verify and validate the transcripts for accuracy.

The issue of transferability is tackled by providing thick descriptions which help the reader to make judgments regarding whether the results are applicable to similar settings. The issue of generalization is not used but contextual relevance.

The issue of dependability of the study is dealt with using an audit trail throughout the entire research process. The issue of confirmability is handled through the use of reflexivity techniques such as journaling and peer debriefing.

3.9 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Positionality of the researcher becomes a key aspect that determines qualitative research. The main researcher is a Pakistani woman from an urban area and educated, without any prior relationship with feudalistic entities and the respondents. Being an outsider had its strengths and weaknesses.

On one side, lack of familial relationships might have resulted in free conversations since the respondents did not have any social obligations towards each other. On the other side, variations in terms of socioeconomic status, educational level, and personal experiences could have developed social distance between the respondents.

As for the feminist stance of the researcher, there could be challenges regarding the interpretation of data in relation to agency in a constrained setting. Reflexive techniques have been utilized during the research process to overcome such issues. A reflective journal has been written down, which includes instances of biases, discomfort, and analysis.

Attempts were also made to equalize power relations through interviewing. Conducting the interview in the participants' own homes gave them more control over the environment, while asking them to question the researcher created a more balanced situation.

3.10 Limitations of the Study

Though helpful, there are also some limitations associated with the study. To begin with, a relatively small sample size used ($n=15$) means that results cannot be easily generalized. Selection bias can be observed since the study recruited participants from the NGO network rather than other sources where one might expect to find more marginalized groups.

The sensitive nature of the research subject matter suggests that some information may not have been disclosed completely by the participants due to fears about their responses. Furthermore, the researcher is situated as an urban and educated person, meaning that he was affected by his personal position during the process.

Lastly, the study does not include women who managed to escape feudalism, considering only those living in these environments.

4. FINDINGS: AMBIVALENT AGENCY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data indicates that women under feudalism in Sindh have a relationship to power which is neither a dichotomy nor simplistic, being not only oppressive but full of ambivalent negotiations. Being neither mere victims of patriarchal hegemony nor defiant rebels, participants in the study inhabit a liminal space of tension, contradiction, and strategizing. The framework of ambivalent agency is used in this paper as a way of understanding the participants' relationship to power, referring to agency that both gives a chance for some autonomy yet reenacts the very constraints.

Five main topics can be identified in the data obtained from interviews: (1) honor as surveillance and moral policing; (2) domestic space as constrained autonomy; (3) resistance and negotiating in silence; (4) emotional work as struggle; and (5) impunity and structural oppression. In each of these topics, there is evidence of an ambivalent dynamic at play, where actions that seem empowering in one respect contribute to further oppression in another aspect. Such dynamics in the participants' lives are discussed with reference to theory, including works by Mahmood (2005), Kandiyoti (1988), and Scott (1985).

Theme 1: Honor as Surveillance and Moral Regulation

The notion of honor (*izzat*) was not discussed as a cultural concept but as a mechanism of constant monitoring which controls people's actions, movement and social interaction. Participants said that they always feel under the watchful eyes of others – not just the family members, but also the members of the wider community. According to Participant 1 (age 34), even simple acts like going shopping are subject to this kind of surveillance and evaluation.

Honor operates within such practices as gossip, community policing and concerns over the family name. As stated by Participant 2 (age 28), even the rumors may affect people's lives in significant ways. Thus, we see here the Foucauldian concepts of

power at play; in particular, the notion of disciplinary power through surveillance makes individuals control their own actions.

Ambivalent

Dimension:

Even with such tight surveillance, some informants, especially those who were young and comparatively better-educated, highlighted how such restraints can be manipulated effectively. Participant 3 (26 years old) pointed out that, when a woman earns a name of being 'respectable' or 'good,' the extent of surveillance might become less strict. Thus, limited room emerges for strategic maneuvers where women can act with some autonomy in socially permissible terms.

Yet, this autonomy comes at a price. It can only be earned through previous conformity and compliance with the imposed norms. In this case, agency is realized not through the subversion of the system, but within it. As such, the established standards are validated by the same mechanism of agency, which demonstrates its ambiguous nature: it offers chances for individual action but legitimizes control mechanisms.

Theme 2: Domestic Space as Controlled Autonomy

The home emerges as an essential area in which women exercise limited autonomy. In their responses, participants revealed that they have some level of influence over decision-making at the household level, especially when making choices about cooking, rearing children, and managing small amounts of money. For example, Participant 4 (aged 22) explained that decision-making sometimes occurs through subtle negotiation.

This kind of influence can be compared to what Kandiyoti (1988) refers to as 'patriarchal bargaining,' where women utilize their gender roles to attain their goals. Thus, the home does not lack elements of autonomy but rather remains an arena where limited autonomy operates under certain constraints.

Ambivalent Dimension:

Nevertheless, the degree of autonomy that they enjoy is very specific in nature. In fact, participants stated that even if they can influence soft decisions, they cannot get involved in important issues, such as decisions regarding marriage, property, and other financial matters. Participant No. 5 (38 years old) explained that decisions regarding her daughter's marriage were beyond her jurisdiction.

This example demonstrates how decision-making autonomy helps the smooth running of the household while preserving patriarchal rule. The involvement of women in the decision-making process maintains the system as it exists. Therefore, although domestic

space provides some level of agency for women, it also sustains unequal gender relations.

Theme 3: Silent Resistance and Everyday Negotiation

Resistance by participants was generally not done in any overt or confronting way. Rather, women resorted to more hidden acts of negotiation such as procrastination, use of intermediaries, silence, and quietly aiding other women. Participant 6, aged 41, noted the importance of silence as an act of survival but reiterated that being silent did not mean agreement.

These acts of negotiation can be seen as everyday acts of resistance as outlined by Scott (1985). Women were thus able to survive and thrive in their restrictive environment while at the same time avoiding open confrontation or any potential retaliation.

Ambivalent Dimension:

Nonetheless, there are dangers associated with such forms of passive resistance. For example, Participant 7 (35 years old) revealed that her silence had been misconstrued as consent, which led to heightened tension when she subsequently voiced her opinions. This is another illustration of how actions aimed at protecting oneself can eventually end up limiting oneself.

In this way, it can be seen that one of the important aspects of ambivalent agency is the possibility that tactics that offer temporary security might lead to future restrictions.

Theme 4: Emotional Labor as Survival and Skill

The importance of emotional labor is another prominent issue raised by the participants. They discussed how important it is for women to manage their emotions, language, and behavior in order not to start quarrels. According to participant 8 (47 years old), even slight dissatisfaction may cause a huge row, which should be avoided all the time.

Emotional control is essential not only in the context of health but also in relationship management, household stability, and image building. Women serve as mediators, carers, and conflict resolvers, putting group harmony above personal satisfaction.

Ambivalent Dimension:

Whereas most of the participants felt emotionally laborious, there were others who regarded this as a demonstration of their skills. For instance, Participant 9 (aged 33), felt proud of herself for always keeping the family atmosphere peaceful since she believed it to be an essential skill.

Thus, there are two aspects in which the concept of emotional labor can be examined; one where the practice is oppressive and

the other, where it is empowering. This proves how simplistic it is to see emotional labor as exploitative.

Theme 5: Structural Impunity and Normalized Inequality

The participants repeatedly mentioned their lack of trust in formal legal institutions in situations where powerful people were at stake. Family disputes, as well as those connected to honor, are resolved informally by means of jirgas. They are seen as more easily approachable, but extremely patriarchal. Thus, Participant 10 (45) stated that whenever important figures are involved, there is no way to find justice.

Such a trend can be associated with structural impunity, as victims have no chance of obtaining justice through formal channels due to institutional failures and unwillingness to address the perpetrator. Consequently, it seems like an inevitable outcome for women.

Ambivalent Dimension:

It is quite interesting to note that the respondents have identified a selective application of the formal legal system. According to Participant 11, aged 52, 'disputes about family issues and honor are usually resolved by informal means, but land and property disputes are usually brought to formal court.'

This strategic selectivity indicates that feudal agents utilize both the formal and informal legal system for different purposes. The former is employed in situations where it serves economic ends, while the latter is preserved to control social and gender relationships. This observation makes one realize that impunity is not an arbitrary concept but a deliberate one.

Negative Cases: When Agency Fails Completely

However, while some of the respondents mentioned various types of negotiations, some of their stories indicated the limitations and failures of such approaches to exercise agency. The negative cases are particularly valuable from an analytical perspective, as they point out where the agency ends.

Participant 12 (aged 29) spoke about her attempts to negotiate on behalf of her daughter in order to ensure the latter had access to education. Instead of reaching her goals, Participant 12 had to face even closer surveillance and become completely isolated in her house. In this case, negotiation becomes defiance that provokes more restrictions.

Likewise, Participant 13 (aged 23) explicitly stated her choice of obedience to be determined by her desire to survive both physically and socially. This case demonstrates what might be called minimal

agency – the choice of one option out of limited alternatives with no chance of changing any structure.

In other words, these examples show that the agency can vary significantly and sometimes fail to yield any results or cause some damage.

Integration with Discursive Cases

The stories that participants tell were highly influenced by their knowledge about famous instances of honor killings and injustice meted out by law. Some of the participants made mention of famous cases where women had broken social norms and suffered grave repercussions for doing so. These acts serve as discursive boundary practices and help reinforce the boundaries set by society.

An example is provided by Participant 3 (26 years old) when she mentions a famous incident where a woman openly flouted her social norms and ended up being killed. The participant used this act as a point of differentiation as she made mention of the importance of keeping within the socially accepted boundary levels.

Equally, there was a general understanding among participants that powerful people hardly ever get punished by law. None had direct experience with famous legal cases, yet their understanding matched what is known about impunity. Such understanding affected their decisions, especially concerning resorting to formal justice.

This research has shown how discursive events serve as potent forces of social interaction, which affect both opinions and behavior. Discursive practices construct boundaries, making them internalized and thus ensuring the persistence of power dynamics even when no force is applied.

5. DISCUSSION: THEORIZING AMBIVALENT AGENCY

In this part, the results obtained will be discussed in terms of the theoretical framework that is employed for the study. This framework will include Kandiyoti (1988), Mahmood (2005), and Scott (1985), with an emphasis on their development and further elaboration through ambivalent agency. Contradictions in the data will no longer be considered a flaw in the methodology or an anomaly; instead, they will be taken as constitutive features of social life in feudal-patriarchal settings. As such, the focus will shift from the issue of women having agency to that of its functioning in the face of structural restrictions.

From this perspective, women's activities cannot be regarded as either resistance or submission. On the contrary, they occur in a

spectrum of negotiations whereby any effort made in pursuit of personal survival, safety, or autonomy may lead to unwanted results. This means that in this section, the idea will be developed that ambiguity is a sign of strength rather than a deficiency of women's agency under conditions of high structuration.

Honor as Contested Discourse, Not Stable Structure

The results support the assertion that honor (izzat) serves as a ubiquitous surveillance and moral discipline system as theorized by Kandiyoti (1988) with regard to patriarchal surveillance. Nevertheless, there is a layer added to the discussion that complicates the theory. Honor does not seem to be a static concept nor one which is consistently experienced. It is a contested and dynamic concept whose meaning changes based on generation, education, and situation.

Relatively young and educated subjects saw honor as more than just a system of restriction. The implication that a good reputation decreases the level of surveillance implies that honor was something that could be negotiated. A key point of theoretical development in this case lies in recognizing that honor is not just imposed; it is reproduced and sometimes even softened.

The implication here is that the practice of patriarchal bargaining, as conceptualized by Kandiyoti, is not a single moment of strategy but a continuous iterative process. Women continually readjust their behavior based on expectations and feedback from their surroundings. The limits of appropriate behavior are not ثابتة (constant) and entirely known; they require continual adjustment and vigilance.

On the other hand, the flexible process of accommodation does not destroy the honor system. It actually ensures the continuity of the honor system by making small allowances within the system. Hence, honor is both a constraint and a space of negotiation in feudal patriarchal systems.

Ambivalent Agency: When Empowerment Reinforces Patriarchy

The key theoretical insight that arises from this research study is the development of the idea of ambivalent agency, which entails the double effects of strategic behaviors adopted by women. Ambivalent agency can be explained as the phenomenon whereby the practices that lead to either immediate or localized gains for women also end up strengthening the patriarchal system.

Ambivalent agency can be observed clearly through the findings presented in this research study. For example, when women successfully negotiate household stability, they become influential

decision-makers within the family; however, such behaviors strengthen the family system, minimizing any structural changes that may occur. Another case where the concept of ambivalent agency is observable includes women who feel proud of their emotional work since they feel good about themselves, yet they reaffirm the idea that emotional control is a woman's task.

An additional instance can be found in how women strategically navigate honor. Through practicing 'respectability' and behaving in ways consistent with social norms, they achieve more freedom or mobility. Yet, in doing so, they reinforce the very logic of honor as something that requires acquisition and perpetuation through gender-specific means.

It is evident that agency should not simply be defined in terms of empowerment and/or resistance. Rather, it needs to be considered from a perspective that takes into account not only intentions but also the potential effects. Whereas Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance allows us to understand subversive capabilities and Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of strategic adaptation explains women's resourcefulness, neither of them is capable of accounting for unintended consequences of agency.

In this respect, ambivalent agency helps to address some theoretical voids. First, it acknowledges the inherent paradox of agency in oppressive contexts. Second, it brings the analysis back to effects rather than intentions.

The Limits of Everyday Resistance

The theory of everyday resistance developed by Scott (1985) gives us a useful approach to analyzing the subtle ways of resisting domination by subordinate groups. Indeed, the evidence obtained from the present study shows that such kinds of resistance take place in feudal Sindh using silence, delay, indirect negotiation, and symbolic defiance.

At the same time, some shortcomings can be seen in using this theory. In particular, as can be concluded from the results of the research, everyday resistance cannot be effective if it is seen or understood as defiance by the people in power because in this case, it becomes easier to monitor and limit the actions of subordinates.

Indeed, this conclusion can be easily seen from negative cases mentioned in the findings; thus, the attempts of subordinates at negotiating initially remained invisible but later became seen, resulting in increasing control over them rather than providing more freedom.

This insight certainly does not contradict Scott's theory but instead builds upon it by highlighting the particular circumstances that will

enable everyday resistance to have an impact. When everyday resistance goes beyond the limit of visibility, it loses its ability to serve as a means of protection. Instead, resistance becomes opposition, which carries more dangers.

Patriarchal Bargaining without Transformation

The idea of patriarchal bargaining put forward by Kandiyoti (1988) is that women's adaptations to the patriarchal system, under certain conditions, can lead to incremental change. However, the findings of this research show that in the case of contemporary feudal Sindh, patriarchal bargaining results in stability and not change.

This can be explained by the way women are structurally constrained. The women are dependent on feudal landowners for their economic support, denied education and employment opportunities, and lack the power of law. Without any options left, women's tactics become accommodation rather than transformation.

Under such circumstances, patriarchal bargaining is a way of regulating inequality rather than fighting against it. Women bargain for some minor gains in the existing structure, yet the structure of power remains unchanged due to these bargains; they merely strengthen the structure and make it more sustainable, as well as livable and untransformed at the same time.

This theory provides a much darker but also more realistic understanding of how patriarchy works under extreme conditions, stressing the crucial importance of structure in defining the limits of individual agency.

The Discursive Function of High-Profile Cases

High-profile cases can be understood in terms of their importance as not being examples of incidents, but rather as discourses which help form perceptions and influence individual action. Such cases are used as narratives, setting the limits for appropriate behavior and enforcing social norms.

An example of such a narrative is the high-profile honor killing where a female member of society questioned the traditional gender roles. This case is a warning story for individuals, generating fear within them and enforcing the consequences of deviation from normative behavior.

Likewise, high-profile cases dealing with legal immunity enjoyed by feudal lords create an atmosphere of cynicism regarding formal mechanisms of resolving disputes. The idea that powerful members of society cannot be held accountable leads to a situation

where women refrain from using formal methods of dispute resolution.

When considered together, the fear and cynicism created by this rhetoric serve as methods of governance without force. They broaden the scope of patriarchal authority through influencing how women understand risks, opportunities, and consequences. This discovery builds on previous research related to honor and violence by emphasizing the importance of rhetoric in sustaining social control.

Reflexivity: How Positionality Shaped Interpretation

The positionality of the researcher affected the process of data collection and interpretation considerably. Being an urban-educated woman, the researcher had some theoretical approaches associated with her research that included predispositions toward uncovering various examples of women's agency.

If it were not for her conscious efforts, this particular orientation would lead to a one-sided view of the phenomenon under study. Fortunately, the researcher used reflexive journaling and peer debriefing techniques to achieve an unbiased interpretation of her findings.

In fact, situations where participants described themselves as having made choices that were not necessarily empowering led to a reassessment of the interpretations made initially. One such interpretation was when the phrase 'I choose safety' was initially seen as an indication of compliance but which was later seen as a form of ambivalent agency.

It is important to note that this was an important reflexive step in the formulation of the concept of ambivalent agency. Rather than being boxed into a binary interpretation of either resisting or submitting, the complexity of experience was appreciated through the use of a reflexive research method.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

The research sought to explore how women living in feudal Sindh negotiated agency under highly patriarchal socio-economic structures of honor, patriarchy, and socio-economic oppression. Qualitative methodologies, which adopt interpretive approaches, were used, and as such, do not seek representativeness but rather offer a more insightful view of the phenomenon through contextual analysis. This research has found a much more ambivalent picture regarding women's agency in feudal societies than the stereotypical portrayal of victimhood and resistance that is prevalent among scholars.

In terms of agency, women have been shown to possess the ability to act and negotiate in ways that ensure their protection, yet not in any revolutionary ways. Honor (izzat) becomes a way in which women experience constant pressure and moral surveillance by others, but the strength of this pressure varies based on educational backgrounds and age. The domestic domain offers a space where women can exert some level of control, but their agency is strictly confined within that domain.

In a similar vein, the use of tactics such as quiet resistance and negotiation allow for the management of risks without confrontation, but they are vulnerable practices which could lead to unintended consequences if misunderstood. Emotional labor, although felt as something oppressive and tiring, is reinterpreted by some informants as a means of gaining competence and feeling proud of themselves. Finally, impunity, through practices of selective law enforcement and recourse to informal justice, institutionalizes gender inequality by shaping women's perceptions of justice.

The core finding of this research is that the concept of women's agency within the context of feudalism in Sindh must be characterized as ambivalent, as it yields immediate practical gains such as more freedom, power, or protection, at the same time as it contributes to the continuity of the very systems which make agency possible. Such ambivalence is not a problem of theoretical conception nor an empirical oddity; it is simply a feature of agency within structures of enduring inequality.

Through its focus on this ambivalence, the study also refutes both the triumphalist account, which tends to exaggerate the possibilities of transformation through agency, and the victim discourse, which denies women's ability to act at all. Rather, it calls attention to the need to acknowledge agency as an inherently complex process.

Theoretical Contributions

There are three important contributions of this research to the feminist theory and general theory of gender and power.

The first contribution lies in synthesis of the theoretical frameworks by Kandiyoti (1988), Mahmood (2005), and Scott (1985). The theoretical concept of patriarchal bargain by Kandiyoti shows the adaptation of women to constraints imposed on them. On the other hand, agency in the context of self-formation as understood by Mahmood provides an expanded view of agency. The framework of everyday resistance provided by Scott further broadens the view of the nature of subordinate behavior. By using

all the three concepts, a multidimensional framework on agency is provided.

The second contribution is made by the introduction of ambivalent agency as an analytical framework. Although all the three frameworks consider the constraint within which agency takes place, they highlight the adaptive and resistant aspects of it. The study considers the consequences of agency, highlighting the unintended effects of the strategy adopted by actors. The study, thereby, focuses on one of the most significant gaps in the literature.

The third contribution of the research is that it contributes to the body of work on honor killings and violence against women in general by theorizing these high-profile cases as discourses instead of mere illustrations. This creates feelings of internalized fear and cynicism among women, which determines their understanding of risks and possibilities for justice. The study thus broadens the field of honor beyond the mere physical dimension to encompass the discursive dimension of power.

Practical and Policy Implications

The implications of the results generated from this study have significant implications for policy makers and organizations that are engaged in initiatives aimed at gender equality in feudal or rural contexts. First, there is a clear indication that initiatives targeting the empowerment of women without regard to structures of constraint may bear very limited or entirely counterproductive fruits.

There is thus an urgent need to develop effective legal frameworks as part of an effort to overcome structural impunity in these settings. This requires efforts to enhance protection for complainants, reduce the power that feudal lords wield over law enforcement and the judiciary, among other reforms.

Secondly, measures must be taken to ensure that women do not depend economically on feudal structures, but rather that they are provided with alternatives such as means of production, employment, and finances, all of which would help boost the efficacy of agency as a concept.

Thirdly, intervention should involve interaction with concepts of culture, such as that of honor, which should not be seen as static. Initiatives within communities should focus on fostering discussions that can lead to the reinterpretation of concepts such as *izzat* by linking the concept to other forms of dignity rather than that of women's body control.

Fourthly, although the value of education cannot be understated, it is worth noting that educational programs should not automatically result in any change or transformation, as this study suggests.

Overall, any policy interventions in this regard must take into account all three dimensions – economic, legal and cultural – as they are inherently related and intertwined. Failure to address all three in their totality means promoting agency within structures that continue to support oppression.

Future Research

Future research can be conducted on various aspects suggested by this study. To begin with, there should be an examination of ambivalent agency in different environments or circumstances that result in it moving away from stability to transformation. Comparative research in different regions or socio-economic and institutional environments will help understand better how ambivalent agency works and its influence on society.

Second, the role played by men in upholding patriarchal norms, the concept of honor, and bargaining can be further explored. In order to find ways to change these relations, it is important to understand their perception of what is going on.

Third, it would be interesting to conduct long-term research in order to observe the evolution of feudal structures and the roles assigned to genders in such societies in the process of economic or legal development.

Fourth, the psychological aspect of ambivalent agency deserves special attention because constant pressure and bargaining can affect women's lives in many ways.

Final Statement

The role of women in feudal Sindh can hardly be understood through simplistic dichotomies of either being passive victims of the feudal structure or actively resisting their oppression. On one hand, they are not just objects who passively endure the oppression, and on the other hand, they are not fully liberated from any constraints and are not free to decide their fate. They rather navigate through constraining conditions, strategically choosing the best option among the few available.

While women do have agency, this is an ambiguous notion because it can only help solve immediate problems but does little about bringing any changes to the larger structure of oppression. It helps them survive, negotiate, gain temporary freedom, and at the same time reinforces the very inequalities they are struggling against.

To comprehend this ambiguity, however, is not meant to downplay or undermine the struggles women endure or their accomplishments. On the contrary, it is meant to take their experience seriously by appreciating its complex and contradictory nature and moving past simplified concepts of empowerment.

REFERENCES

Ali, T. S., Krantz, G., Gul, R., Asad, N., Johansson, E., & Mogren, I. (2012). Gender roles and their influence on life prospects for women in urban Karachi, Pakistan: A qualitative study. *Global Health Action*, 5(1), 1–9.

<https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v5i0.7448>

Ali, T. S., Mogren, I., & Krantz, G. (2012). Intimate partner violence and mental health effects among women in Pakistan. *European Journal of Public Health*, 22(3), 414–418.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckr038>

Amnesty International. (2019). *‘As if hell fell upon me’: Violence against women in Pakistan*. Amnesty International.

Bhanbhro, S., Lakhani, N. B., & Khowaja, N. A. (2014). Honour killing in Sindh: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19(5), 560–566.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2014.06.003>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Chesler, P. (2010). Worldwide trends in honor killings. *Middle East Quarterly*, 17(2), 3–15.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Gazdar, H. (2007). Class, caste and social oppression in Pakistan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(34), 3446–3452.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4419130>

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. (2021). *State of human rights in Pakistan 2020*. HRCP.

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. (2023). *State of human rights in Pakistan 2022*. HRCP.

- Jacoby, H. G., & Mansuri, G. (2010). Bride exchange and women's welfare in rural Pakistan. *American Economic Review*, 100(4), 1804–1825. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.100.4.1804>
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>
- Khan, A. (2018). Honor killings in Pakistan: Legal and cultural perspectives. *South Asian Studies*, 33(1), 45–62.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30(1), 61–88. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42>
- Mumtaz, K., & Shaheed, F. (1987). *Women of Pakistan: Two steps forward, one step back?* Zed Books.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Shah, N. A. (2016). Feudalism and democratic politics in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 36(2), 987–1002.
- Warrach, S. (2005). Honour killings and the law in Pakistan. In L. Welchman & S. Hossain (Eds.), *'Honour': Crimes, paradigms and violence against women* (pp. 278–295). Zed Books.