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BACHA KAB KAROGI? A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE
REPRODUCTIVE AGENCY EXERCISED BY MEMON WOMEN

by

Malaika Chokshi

A project submitted to the Department of Social
Sciences and Liberal Arts in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the
Degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences

Completed under the supervision of
Professor Irum Iqbal Hussain

Institute of Business Administration
Karachi, Pakistan

12th September 2024

Acknowledgements

Firstly and most importantly, I would truly like to thank my Allah for giving me the strength and determination to be able to complete this project, Alhumdulillah. It started out as a passion project but only You know how much this thesis has tested my patience, so thank you Allah Taala.

Secondly, I would like to extend the most heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Ms Irum Iqbal Hussain for her constant support, kindness, endless patience and continuous encouragement. I am so glad I chose her as my supervisor because this thesis would not have been the same without her. I would also like to sincerely thank Ms. Aliya Iqbal Naqvi for agreeing to become my second reader. It means so much to me because your keen interest in my project during the early sessions of CE-1 really motivated me to do my best.

Next, I would like to mention my parents without whom I never would have been able to do this, let alone finish my degree or have the opportunity to get one, in the first place. Being the first person in my entire extended family to have earned a university degree has only been possible because my parents have got my back. The only reason I can go through life confidently is because they have told me, every step of the way, that I am capable. To my mom and dad, thank you and I love you.

I would also like to thank my husband for being so supportive throughout this journey. Thank you for sleeping with the lights on while I pulled an all-nighter, for ordering late night snacks for us while I ranted about my slow progress, for waking me up despite my ten consistent alarms to start work early in the morning, for being there for me and for believing in me. You know how much you mean to me.

To my sister, thank you for getting me water twenty times a day, for helping me with my thesis, for your never-ending support and humour. To my brother, thank you for always asking me what

my thesis topic is and acting interested, for constantly appreciating me, for always looking out for me.

I would also like to mention my friends, all of them, for their support, love and encouragement. We can only be as great as the company we keep so I am pretty happy with how amazing I get to be. A special shoutout to Sana and Maria for the constant thesis updates and rants, we made it.

This project would not have been possible without my participants so if you ever read this, I want you to know how much I appreciate your candid honesty and willingness to trust me with the details of your life. Your contributions have allowed me to explore a topic close to my heart.

Finally, this project is for all the Memon women out there who go about their lives wishing they had more power to re-write their narratives, this is for you. You are powerful, you are capable of changing your life in more ways than one, you are an agent.

And, to the little baby in my belly, I hope I can be a good mom to you, I hope the world treats you with nothing but kindness and I hope you always recognise the agency you possess.

Abstract

Bacha Kab Karogi? A qualitative analysis of the reproductive agency exercised by Memon women

by

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Institute of Business Administration, 2024

Professor Irum Iqbal Hussain, Supervisor

This study explores how Memon women exercise their reproductive agency within the context of patriarchal family structures in the Memon community. The study investigates decision-making dynamics in Memon women's everyday lives from their educational and professional choices to their interpersonal relationships with their husband and in-laws as well as discover how women arrive at their reproductive choices regarding children, contraceptives, child-rearing, and more so as to achieve their desired outcomes. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven Memon women between the ages of 18 and 30, all living in joint families to gain a deeper look into these women's lived experiences. The findings reveal that while Memon women are situated in classic patriarchal systems, they assert their agency through a combination of overt and covert strategies, often making patriarchal bargains that allow them to maintain some degree of control over their reproductive lives. These indirect strategies may range from communication and negotiation to backstairs influence and strategic compromises. Women may also demonstrate their reproductive agency clearly by openly resisting the gendered expectations of them as mothers.

The findings have been analysed using both Kandiyoti's theory of classic patriarchy (1988) and Adrienne Rich's theory of institutional motherhood (1976) which reveal a nuanced interplay of patriarchal burdens, social expectations, familial obligations and personal desires which these women have to navigate through every day. Overall, this research adds to the literature surrounding reproductive empowerment of South Asian women while addressing the gap in previous literature which lacks any substantive research on the unique influence of ethnicity on

women's reproductive choices and agency. It also contributes to motherhood studies by exploring the application of a classic theory of motherhood in the South Asian context while simultaneously analysing its engagement with systems of classic patriarchy.

Keywords: reproductive agency, institutional motherhood, classic patriarchy, strategies of agency, Memons, patriarchal bargain

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Rationale

I have been married for more than a year now and the number of people who have shown a keen interest in my fertility decisions since then has made me realise the extent of how central a woman's reproductive behaviour is to our socio-cultural norms, so much so that it is considered everyone's business to ask and advise about. As I embarked on my own fertility journey, I realised that a woman's reproductive behaviour and outcomes in Pakistan are never solely a product of her own desires and plans but are constantly influenced by a number of stakeholders. These primarily include the husband, the mother, the mother-in-law and in some cases, the extended family as well. This, in turn, shrinks the woman's role in deciding her own fertility goals and acting upon them. Hence, I chose this topic because a) I can relate with it personally; b) I am curious as to why a woman's reproductive decisions are deemed a public matter and c) I have seen women struggling in myriad ways owing to the lack of sex education in the country.

Background

Fertility Transition in Pakistan

Pakistan has a population of 241.5 million people currently with a growth rate of 2.55% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023) becoming the fifth most populous country in the world. Following World War II and the fall of the colonial empire, mortality rates all over the developing world declined sharply which encouraged an increase in fertility rates (Bongaarts & Hodgson, 2022). In 1960, the population of Pakistan was growing at the rate of 2.7% per annum which prompted the government to launch a national family planning programme aimed at slowing the rapid growth. Nonetheless, it did not prove to be immediately effective and the total fertility rate (TFR) did not begin to decline until the 1990s (Sather & Casterline, 1998). Total fertility rate (TFR) refers to the number of children that a woman would give birth to if her fertility rate was aligned with current age-specific fertility rates (Bongaarts & Hodgson, 2022).

Beginning in 1990, the fertility transition in Pakistan has been slow but consistent owing to the efforts of the family planning programme, investments in education and the spread of contraceptives, the total fertility rate (TFR) in Pakistan has declined from almost 7 in 1970 to 3.39 in 2020. This means that while a typical woman in 1970 had close to 7 children, this decreased to less than 4 children per woman in 2020. However, it is still higher compared to other developing countries in South Asia such as India and Bangladesh, both of which completed their fertility transition before 2015 by lowering the TFR to less than 2.5 births per woman (Bongaarts & Hodgson, 2022).

The contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) in Pakistan has also stayed consistent around 30-35% since 2007 despite government efforts to raise it to 50% by 2025 (Abdullah et al., 2023). This is also lower in comparison to other populous neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh which is at 62% and India at 56% (Hossain et al., 2018). Moreover, a study conducted in 2008 showed that the true fertility level in Pakistan is higher than the desired level of fertility which points to the fact that one in every four pregnancies is unwanted or ill-timed and that the TFR would be lesser by one child if all unwanted pregnancies could be avoided (Ali & Ahmed, 2008). If actual TFR is higher than desired fertility rates then there must be an unmet need for contraception. Unmet need for contraception refers to those women who do not want to get pregnant but also do not use contraception (Bongaarts & Hodgson, 2022). Although this may be due to a number of reasons such as pressure to have a son, marital rape, unavailability of contraceptives, etc; it makes apparent the inability and hesitance of women to transform their reproductive desires into behavioral reality. This is because women never make reproductive decisions alone but are constantly influenced by other family members such as the husband and the mother-in-law. These power imbalances within the family designate women to a secondary position (Bhatti, 2014).

Memon Community

Belonging to the Memon community myself, I used to find it rather intriguing how the culture I grew up with was so foreign to some of my friends who belonged to other ethnicities. For

example, my friends in school had never heard of Khowsuey¹ until I introduced it to them and they loved it so with time, we learnt to appreciate each other's unique backgrounds. Nonetheless, growing up with a culturally diverse group of friends led me to often stereotype my ethnicity in an attempt to explain it to them in layman's terms. This, unfortunately, also skewed my personal understanding and appreciation for my unique background for the longest time. Hence, this research study is an ode to my Memon heritage and trying to understand it in the rawest and most personal way.

Memon women, in this research study, refer to women from a Muslim ethnic group who originally belonged to the Indian subcontinent. A majority of this small community lived in Kathiawar which is a part of present-day Gujarat in India. Many families, around 50% of the community, had to uproot and leave their lives behind in 1947 and migrated to Karachi and Hyderabad in Pakistan (Thaplawala, 2009). Over time, Memons have spread around the world and settled as communities in places such as Canada, USA, UK, South Africa, etc. Memons usually form Jamaats wherever they go which are elected bodies appointed to protect the interests of the community and foster strong internal connections (Memon Community, n.d.).

What ties this community together is their culture, their religion and their language. Interestingly, Memons hail from a Hindu community called the Lohanas, who used to reside in the Lohana Puraganas or Lohana Desh in the Indian subcontinent. Owing to the spread of Islam in the region, about 700 families converted and formed a community by the name of Momins. However, with time, the word Momin changed to Memon and that is what they came to be known as. Due to their conversion, around 600 families migrated to Kathiawar and as time went on, these families travelled and settled in different parts of India. This caused marked divisions within the Memon community as they were deeply influenced by the area they lived in so much so that it became a part of their identity (Memon Community, n.d.). For example, Memon families who lived in Bantwa, India pre-partition are still known as Bantwa Memons and likewise for other classifications such as Jetpur Memons, Okhai Memons, Kutiyana Memons and more. Hence, according to Hutchinson & Smith's (1996) definition of ethnicity, the Memon

¹ *Khowsuey is originally a Burmese dish which was adapted by the Memon community of Pakistan and consists of egg noodles, coconut curry and a variety of condiments. It is very popular among the community and is shared across most sub-types of Memons.

community can be categorised as one because they share a common proper name, common ancestry, shared historical memories, common culture which includes several customs and Memoni language and a link with a homeland.

While researching my own community for this study, I found a few books written by Memons about the Memoni history, culture and language but it was interesting and unsurprising to note that women were largely absent from these narratives. Memons are an affluent community, known for their business acumen, philanthropy and culture but it is also a male-dominated community where men have had more say than women. All history on Memons has been produced by men and is populated by male characters which raises an important question as to the status and position of women in the community. In most of recorded history, women have remained invisible and unnamed (Shrivastava, 2017) which points to their status within patriarchal, South Asian cultures. The marked divide between the private and the public, a characteristic of patriarchal societies, explains this invisibility. The Memon community is also distinctly patriarchal where men have always been the head of households and retain control of both domestic and economic matters. This relegates women to the secondary position of bargaining² and negotiating with their patriarchs to assume some form of power in matters of their own life such as reproduction.

From my personal knowledge, several traditions and cultural habits are what differentiate the reproductive experiences of Memon women and their subsequent claiming of agency, from women around them. Many of these shared, distinctive experiences include age at marriage, education levels, demand for children and more. For example, within the Memon community, mothers go to their maternal home for forty days after childbirth for postnatal care. This is most common for first pregnancies and the duration of stay for subsequent births is reliant on the husband or in-law's permission. Another reproductive experience unique to Memons is that all the expenses incurred during pregnancy and birth of the first child are borne by the girl's parents and upon completion of the forty day stay, the girl's parents also host an event in which the husband and in-laws are invited and they are given gifts along with gifts for the baby and the mother. This event is called an *aana*. Similarly, the in-laws are supposed to bring *chhatti* (gifts

² This has been explained in detail in the theoretical framework section in Chapter 2.

for the baby and the mother) on the seventh day of the birth after the *aqeeqah*³. These reproductive traditions are fairly common among all categories of Memons. Early marriages are also extremely common within Memons, especially of females who are likely to get married before or by the age of twenty. Although circumstances are improving with regard to the empowerment of Memon women, many families still discourage female education and wish to get their daughters married. As for Memon girls who are studying, they have been constantly told that their education will be useful for child-rearing so as to produce a better, more consciously developed generation of Memons. It is also a commonly held desire for newly married couples to reproduce within the first year of their marriage and if they do not, they are subject to repeated inquiries by relatives. So, as far as my personal observations go, Memon women are usually confined to the domestic realm and believed to be natural mothers, wives and household managers.

Significance of Research Question

My research study then is a qualitative exploration of the reproductive experiences of Memon women with an in-depth focus on *reproductive decision making* regarding choices in and about children, contraceptives and other experiences unique to them. This is an important area of research because women's choices are already downgraded in a patriarchal setting and in matters as intimate and significant as reproduction, women don't often share the same agency due to unequal power dynamics within the household (Agarwal, 1997). Although much research has been done on the reproductive experiences and agency of women in general, there is still work to be done in exploring the impact of ethnicity on a woman's reproductive agency. Hence, my research question is, "How do women exercise reproductive agency within the Memon community?"

³ Aqeeqah is an Islamic practice (Sunnah) in which two goats are sacrificed on the seventh day of the birth of a boy and one goat for a girl to express gratitude to God in the form of charity and seek protection from evil spirits and calamities.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Frameworks & Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Motherhood as Institution

Adrienne Rich was an influential poet, essayist and feminist who, after becoming a mother, changed her style of writing to focus more on women's role in society, racism and the Vietnam War (Adrienne Rich, 2023). She wrote the book, *Of Woman Born* (1976), to situate her own experiences as a mother within the wider landscape of the institution which informs these experiences. In this book, she talks about power imbalances, especially with regard to motherhood within patriarchy. She has defined motherhood to mean two things closely entwined: motherhood as experience which refers to the relationship between a woman, her reproductive powers and her children and motherhood as institution which is focused on making certain that all women remain under male control (p. 13). Motherhood as an institution then becomes oppressive for women where they may have no room for personal growth or even an identity separate from that of a mother. Rich refers to the institution of motherhood as being a foundation upon which a lot of other social and political systems such as patriarchy, religion, capitalism and others stand. It creates a separation between the public and the private realms by banishing women/mothers from the factories to the private sanctity of the home where it dictates their conduct by decreeing childrearing and other domestic chores to be the women's duty. This, in turn, gives birth to the notion that a woman's labour is worth less because it is only in her nature to be a mother and does not require any extra effort on her part which further isolates her and deepens the rift between the private and the public.

By taking away women's choices, the institution has "alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them" (Rich, 1986, p. 13). The institution only prescribes and advocates behaviour that is useful to men and considers harmful behaviour such as abortion deviant. Andrea O'Reilly is a professor at the school of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University and is known as the founder of Motherhood Studies (2006) and creator of *Matricentric Feminism* (2016) which makes her an expert on motherhood (Aoreilly: *Faculty of*

Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, 2024). In her analysis of Rich's *Of Woman Born*, O'Reilly has further categorised the repressive and tyrannical ideology of institutional motherhood into eight themes (2007). Some of these themes reflect on how only a mother can care for her children, how that care should be available all the time and how a mother should feel fulfilled by this role of mothering and require nothing else. These themes make it apparent how mothers are afforded the responsibility of parenting but are granted no real power to make any choices regarding it. Adrienne Rich uses the term "powerless responsibility" to describe this phenomenon and O'Reilly refers to it as refusing women any real agency to decide their own behaviours as mothers (O'Reilly, 2007). Rich (1986) explains that "the idea of maternal power has been domesticated. In transfiguring and enslaving woman, the womb—the ultimate source of the power—has historically been turned against us and itself made into a source of powerlessness" (p. 68). This idea of power refers to the maternal control over the child's survival, a mother literally has the power to decide between life and death for her child but with man's power over the woman, he is able to render her powerless. However, what patriarchal motherhood dictates does not always translate into women's lived reality as they still find room for resistance, no matter how small (Rich, 1986; Kabeer, 1999).

Rich's theory of institutional motherhood revolutionised the literary study of motherhood and has been used to understand motherhood outside the West. It has also served as a nudge in the right direction for other theories on motherhood such as public motherhood in African studies. Lorelle Semley's article titled, *Public Motherhood in West Africa as Theory and Practice* (2012), used Rich's theory to provide support for the emergence of public motherhood in Africa which refers to how motherhood is perceived and performed in the public sphere, how women navigate their roles as mothers in public space and how societal expectations shape their experiences and identities. Zinia Mitra (2020) repeatedly utilised Rich's book, *Of Women Born*, to comment on motherhood in India and draw parallels between Rich's description of patriarchal motherhood and the lived experiences of mothers in India. For example, after citing a direct quotation from 'Of Woman Born' about how patriarchy is the power of the fathers, Mitra states, "marriage and motherhood are strongly founded within the patriarchal community in India to the point that both remain universal" (p.69). This demonstrates how Mitra creates a connection between present-day India and 20th century America through Rich's theory on motherhood. This shows that Rich's

theory of institutional motherhood and her description of how motherhood has been used as a tool to further the patriarchy is still applicable today, outside the West.

Reproductive Agency

O'Reilly discussed maternal agency in the context of her theory on feminist mothering which means to “practice mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity and autonomy” (p. 802). Her definition of agency was then borrowed from Rich’s book, *Of Woman Born*, which claimed agency was “to refuse to be a victim and then go on from there” (p. 246). According to O'Reilly, this definition extends agency not just to women of privilege who may possess power but also to marginalised women. Naila Kabeer, an esteemed scholar of Gender and Development, has theorised agency in the context of South Asia. She (1999a) defines agency as the “ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” (p. 438). However, she states that agency is not just observable action but also comprises the meaning and motivation behind the individual’s actions. Kabeer also highlights that although agency is mostly thought of in the context of decision making, “it can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis” (p. 438).

Kabeer (1999b) analyses women’s position in a society where the system of patriarchy and the injustices that it provokes are so entrenched in social relationships that they become a part of the women’s gendered subjectivities which makes it harder for them to resist those injustices without sabotaging the social relationships close to them. Observing the ways in which women navigate through the troubles they face in public and private, she highlights how women are uncompromising about their oppression in public but are more inclined to compromise in private, especially in their interpersonal relationship with their husbands. Due to their economic dependence on their husbands and the importance of marriage in their lives as fulfilling, women are likely to compromise and conform in the face of injustices inflicted on them by their husbands and in-laws. Even as women become more empowered, they favour renegotiating their position in the family and demanding a higher share in household decision making as opposed to walking out of their abusive marriages.

Feyza Bhatti is a social science researcher with a substantive interest in gender studies, particularly gender inequalities in developing countries. Her PhD thesis (2014) was focused on the intergenerational study of fertility and family change in Punjab, Pakistan in which she mentions that women in South Asia “might opt for more hidden and informal ways of gaining power or influencing decisions without upsetting the status quo, agency might also take various other forms such as choosing not to choose, backstage influence, negotiation, deception or expressing feelings by other forms such as language” (p. 29). According to her, reproductive agency means “conscious strategies and acts that (aim to) influence their fertility careers” (p. 257). Using this definition allows her to capture many different forms of agency, even if women were not always able to achieve their desired outcomes.

Hence, for this research study, I have conceptualised reproductive agency to refer to a woman defining her reproductive goals and attempting to achieve them through whichever way she deems effective. Within this research study, I have categorised reproductive agency into decision making regarding family size, gender composition, first pregnancy and contraceptives as these are some of the primary reproductive behaviours in a young woman's life. Since I am focusing on Memon women only, I will also look at how their unique ethnic background informs their reproductive choices and behaviours. Generally, I will also be evaluating women’s freedom of movement, control over economic resources, domestic decision making, employment and educational level to gain a deeper understanding of their position within the household and the different power structures interacting to determine their experiences.

Bargaining with Patriarchy

Deniz Kandiyoti is an author and researcher in the fields of gender relations and developmental politics. In her influential article, *Bargaining with Patriarchy* (1988), she argues “that women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint of ... the patriarchal bargain of any given society, which may exhibit variations according to class, caste, ethnicity. These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in

the face of their oppression” (p. 275). According to him, these patriarchal bargains are also timeless which means that they may modify over time in the face of change in relational dynamics between the genders. He claims that in countries like India and Pakistan, women’s resistance is more passive and discreet and they make compromises, for the institutionalised system they exist within, is classic patriarchy. Classic patriarchy refers to a structure in which power and authority within the family are organised patrilineally and patrilocally. In this system, an adult male holds the most authority, followed by younger men, then older women, and finally younger women or daughter-in-laws, who occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy.

To survive in this unfortunate reality, the young bride endures the hardships of marriage in anticipation of inheriting the authority of the mother-in-law and holding power over her own daughter-in-law some day. This cyclical nature of power entails an internalisation of the patriarchal system so that to retain and sustain their power, senior women employ interpersonal techniques to exploit the feelings of their husbands and sons which may eventually result in the transfer of authority from their ageing husband to themselves. As a mother, they often inflate their supposed value and underplay the romantic connection between the son and his new bride. This makes apparent women’s active complicity in their own subordination by obeying rules or following practices even when they are harmful to them personally. Through these patriarchal bargains, women become masters of ensuring their own security and position within the family (Kandiyoti, 1988). In this research study, I will be exploring the patriarchal bargains that Memon women make use of while exercising their reproductive agency.

I believe Pakistani society, particularly the Memon community, still thrives on classic patriarchy with a patrilineal and patrilocal system of family which affords the most power and authority to the older men. Kandiyoti’s theory of patriarchal bargains also intertwines with Kabeer and Bhatti’s conceptualisations of women’s agency within South Asia as all three of them focus on the discreet and passive forms of resistance which are characteristic of the agency exercised by women in countries like India and Pakistan so as not to upset the status quo.

Literature Review

Current research shows that women's reproductive agency is restricted by gender norms, sociocultural and religious norms, family dynamics and power imbalances globally. De Bessa (2006) adds to the literature about women being symbolic of tradition by showing how reproduction has also become a site where social values are debated and determined which means that in matters as personal and intimate as reproductive behaviour, women are not the only drivers of their behaviour. This is highlighted by research from various developing countries which support the assertion that women have a limited role in their own reproductive health and behaviour. Women in Somaliland choose home birth over facility-based birth despite the risks and dangers it poses due to a lack of reproductive agency in facility-based birth (Egal et al., 2022). This is demonstrative of the reality that women are sometimes forced to make dangerous choices because of the limited options available to them. Cleeve et al. (2017) also talks about this by looking at how stigma around abortion has led to women opting for harmful abortion practices and delayed post-abortion care seeking in Uganda. These choices, despite their complicated ramifications, are evidence of the reproductive agency exercised by women globally. Willan et al. (2020) explores reproductive agency in South African women and notes how social pressure to have a child is paramount when they are young but decreases over time as they get older hence reproductive agency may also change over time. In Rajasthan, lack of sex education and the stigma around sexual intercourse solely for pleasure has made the use of modern contraception difficult for women which leads to unsafe abortion practices as a means of contraception (Paul et al., 2016). This makes apparent the limited choices and agency that women have in regard to their reproductive health and well-being globally.

Raman et al. (2016) observes an interesting pattern of agency in Indian women who mostly relied on collective decision making, mobility and social activities. 36 participants, who had given birth in the last 2 years, were selected for in-depth interviews from a cohort of mothers in a study in St. John's Medical College (SJMC) Hospital in Bangalore, India. The themes for the interviews included "home environment, sources of support, pregnancy and childbirth expectations, practices and experiences, access to health and support services, women's role and status before and after marriage, women's decision-making capacity, their participation and their mobility" (p. 4). The research found that women related their employment to their sense of

agency as most believed that any form of paid work offered them some control over their lives. With regard to mobility, most women admitted to limited mobility as the mother-in-law or husband were responsible for buying the daily necessities and preferred to go out with their friends or female relatives, if required. As for household decision making, while some women were not consulted at all, most of them emphasised upon collective decision making and rarely made any independent decisions. In all the cases, however, the dominant decision makers were the mother-in-law and the husband. Mostly, when the husband was supportive, such as in a love marriage, the woman admitted to joint decision making. This shows that women in South Asian countries like India or Bangladesh have limited agency which often translates into small, indirect forms of resistance. This limited agency in their personal lives then also manifests in restricted reproductive agency.

Kumar et al.'s (2016) research about the intergenerational transmission of fertility behaviours and preferences in Bihar, India revealed that the mother-in-law's fertility behaviour directly affects the daughter-in-law's family size preferences. For this study, 450 pairs of women and their mother-in-laws were interviewed from three villages in Bihar in 2011. The condition for participants was to be married, have at least one child and live with and share the same kitchen with the mother-in-law. Questionnaire for the women gathered details about household characteristics, their husband's socioeconomic and demographic profiles, individual demographic information, and fertility-related topics such as fertility preferences, fertility history, and interactions with their mother-in-law regarding fertility issues. Additionally, the questionnaire included information about the women's mothers, including their age, education, and number of children. The mother-in-law's questionnaire focused on her characteristics (such as age and education), fertility history (number of children), and her fertility preferences for her daughter-in-law, specifically the desired number of grandchildren. The questionnaires contained both close-ended and open-ended questions with the variables being solely derived from the close-ended questions. The women's preferred family size was the dependent variable which was measured using the Coombs scale⁴ and categorised into low, medium and high family size preference.

⁴ The Coombs scale involves three questions to investigate women's ideal family size and their flexibility regarding it. First, women are asked how many children they ideally want. Then, they are asked whether

By carrying out an ordered logistic regression analysis, the researchers found that while age is positively associated with family size, more education leads women to favour smaller families. In addition to this, the mother-in-law's preferred number of grandchildren is positively reflected in the daughter-in-law's desired family size. The research also establishes a link between the fertility behaviour of biological mothers and their daughters in respect to the mother's education which has a direct impact on the daughter's preferred family size. The article also discusses how, in a patrilocal system, since young married girls are isolated from their kin networks and spend the majority of the day with their mother-in-laws, they have a paramount effect on the girls' reproductive preferences and childbearing decisions. However, the result showed that women's empowerment would increase their negotiating power in terms of small families and increased autonomy would extend them the capacity to make the fertility choices they want.

Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) analysed the influence of region and religion on women's autonomy in India and Pakistan. They gathered data, using surveys to evaluate women's status and autonomy in 1993-94, from Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in India and Punjab in Pakistan. In this study, women's autonomy was measured across four themes: economic decision making, freedom of mobility, freedom of threat from husband and control over and access to economic resources. Economic decision making was evaluated by scoring whether women had a partial or final say in buying food, important household items and jewellery. Mobility was measured by finding out if women could go unaccompanied to nearby, relatively safe places such as a relative's house or village market and to far away places such as the next village. Freedom of threat from husbands focused on whether women feared and were beaten by their husbands. Lastly, control over and access to resources referred to women's control over household income and resources, that is, if she received money to buy things for herself, if she could buy gifts by herself, if she could support herself in old age and if she had any valuables such as goods or land in her ownership.

The results showed regional disparity in women's autonomy but religion had no significant influence. In economic decision making, women reported that they were only involved in routine

they would prefer fewer or more children if they can't have that exact number. Finally, they are asked to select a preference between the lowest or highest number mentioned in the previous answers. This helps to accurately understand women's true family size preference.

decisions such as the purchase of food but not in important economic decisions. Women also had limited mobility with most of them only able to go to nearby, relatively safer places alone. Almost all of these women appeared to have internalised the unfair dominance of their husbands over them, deeming it the husband's right to beat the wife if she is disobedient even if they hoped for better understanding between the couple. With regard to control over and access to resources, women admitted to receiving money to spend but rarely felt the freedom to buy anything on their own. Women, from all three regions, also expressed control over their own dowries and owning some resources. Thus, although women in Tamil Nadu were found to be more empowered than women in both Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, generally women in all three regions experienced limited autonomy in all four domains.

As reflected in Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) research, Pakistan also follows the pattern of limited reproductive agency for women. Bhatti and Jeffery (2012) demonstrate that despite some positive influence of education on young women's reproductive agency, they still have a very limited set of acceptable choices predetermined by their parents, husbands and in-laws to choose from. The authors used data from the RECOUP health and fertility project which relied on a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was gathered through the 'Outcomes of Education and Poverty Survey' conducted in nine districts of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), from around 9000 individuals of 27 communities after applying stratified random sampling frameworks. Along with this, in-depth questionnaires, at an individual level, were also conducted from participants between the ages of 15 and 60. For the qualitative data, 71 young women, aged 20-29 with at least one child less than 6 years old, were interviewed from an urban and a rural community in one district of Punjab and KP each.

In this study, women's agency related to family-building was broken into when and whom she married and when and how she gave birth. In relation to both these domains, women's agency was found to be nuanced in the ways it was practised, with their behaviours ranging from direct submission to direct involvement in matters of spousal selection. Direct submission meant that the consent of these women was not sought and they made no contribution towards the decision at all, believing that either they had no right to or were not "skilled enough" (p. 155) to decide. Informed submission was when the women's consent was sought only at face value for a decision that had already been made. In indirect resistance, women often used excuses or

justifiable rationales to delay marriage or get their way. Direct involvement meant that the women took a stand for themselves and let their parents know their opinions. Some women's agencies also varied as they went from direct involvement to submission or vice versa. Women also relied on supportive social networks to achieve their desired outcomes. In decisions regarding reproduction, it was similarly found that there were multiple stakeholders including the mother-in-law and the husband. Women's choices were then constantly informed by religious, cultural and social contexts. Again, women practised limited agency as they were often unable to act, either due to fatalistic beliefs or dominating husband or mother-in-law who decided the number and timing of children. Some women practised joint decision making with their husbands who supported their wishes and only one was found to make decisions regarding family planning independently by using deception and a supportive social network. However, circumstances may change and so might women's involvement in their own reproductive decision making. Nonetheless, Bhatti and Jeffery (2012) have highlighted, through this study, the various informal and indirect ways that women exercise agency.

To explore factors that influence women's decision making regarding reproductive behaviour, Ali and Sultan (1999) performed a multiple regression analysis on data from the 1990-91 Pakistan Demographic and Health (PDH) Survey. The independent variables included but were not limited to family type, education of husband, employment type of husband, contraceptive use and more. The dependent variable was Children Ever Born (CEB) which referred to the total number of children that each mother in the study had given birth to. Contraceptive use, desire to become pregnant when they did, mobility, education, employment, responses to ideal family size (numeric responses were scored 1 while fatalistic answers were scored 0), and reproductive discussions/joint decision making with husband were all used as markers of empowerment. The study found that the literacy rate of both husbands and wives had an impact on the dependent variable, CEB, while women's desire to become pregnant when they did and their responses to questions about ideal family size both had a positive and significant effect on CEB. Other variables did not show significant results which showcases that although educated women who have the authority to discuss and decide about major reproductive choices with their husbands are considered to be empowered, the culture of having a big family is so entrenched that it "renders a woman incapacitated" (p. 695). Ali and Sultan suggest that the way to go forward is

by not only making women more aware of their rights but also changing male attitudes towards women.

Investigating how rural women in Punjab, Pakistan claim and exercise their agency while constrained within local structures of power, Ahmed (2020) argues in her research article that women exercise agency specific to their social, cultural and historical contexts regardless of the severity of the patriarchal structures they exist within. The researcher used data gathered from semi-structured interviews, observations and focus groups with 30 women in 3 different settlements in Southern Punjab during her doctoral dissertation fieldwork between 2015-2018. Of these women, two groups were identified: 15 women who were state-employed care workers (Lady Health Worker/LHW) and 15 home-based workers. Interviews with home-based workers were conducted inside their homes while LHWs were mostly interviewed at their work and sometimes at home. During these interactions, Ahmed also observed the participants' non-verbal conversations with their family members present there which were helpful indicators of the underlying power dynamics. A hierarchy was also apparent with the elder women, mostly the mother-in-law, being the one to speak and greet first while the younger women usually hesitating to speak openly in front of them. Ahmed claims that the LHWs appeared to exercise agency at work where they were taught to "talk like a man"⁵ and be assertive and patient at home where they were expected to do all house chores such as cooking, cleaning and child rearing as soon as they arrived home so that they could continue going to work without any familial conflict. However, she also iterates that these moments that seem "non-agential" are not necessarily passive or submissive but may just be moments of strength and struggle which lack contextualisation. The home-based workers also exercised agency in their ambitions and desire to work for the sake of their children's education.

Although many LHWs were afforded more mobility and financial freedom, they still avoided challenging the patriarchal status quo openly and opted for more discreet forms of resistance. It was clear that all of these women were aware of how their "gendered positions" (p. 1188) in their relationships with their husbands and in-laws impacted their negotiating power. Women from the

⁵ It is interesting to note here how women are taught to behave *like a man* in situations where they need to be dominant, showcasing the gendered cultural assumption that men are agents in their natural habitat and women need to mimic their mannerisms in order to achieve their desired outcomes.

same biradari or community also depended on each other for support and advice. It was also noted that despite the patriarchal limitations imposed on them, women still manage to find ways to exercise their agency in covert or overt ways and improve their own lives and their children's within this structure. Hence, the paper concludes with the assertion to challenge the exaggeration of active agency in women's lives so as to focus on and validate their lived experiences within gendered constraints in patriarchal societies.

Reproductive behaviours and needs of women can sometimes also become a negotiation with family members and in-laws and a woman may be allowed to do as she pleases if she has a supportive family. So then, the limits of her reproductive agency are shaped by the kindness of those around her. Research also shows that women who are more actively involved in the selection of their spouses are also more successful in negotiating their reproductive needs after marriage (Hamid et al., 2011). Mahmood (2002) also investigated the reproductive implications of women's role in domestic decision making in Pakistan in both urban and rural regions, using data from the Pakistan Fertility and Family Planning Survey (1996-97) based on 7,584 married women aged between 15-49 years. Of these women, 70% were from rural areas and 30% resided in urban areas with the majority living in Punjab and the minority coming from Balochistan. For this analysis, the dependent variables were the desire to have more children and current use of contraceptives. A multivariate analysis was carried out against the following independent variables: decision making autonomy in matters of finance, child rearing and shopping for essentials like food and clothing, freedom of mobility and spousal communication.

The results showed that urban women were more at par with their husbands in domestic decision making than rural women. Although education had a slight impact on improving decision making autonomy, employment status appeared to have no influence whatsoever since very few women were involved in paid work. Age and marriage duration were also found to be positive contributing factors in increasing women's domestic decision making within the household, with older women having more influence over younger women. Other family members such as mother-in-law were also significantly involved in the decision making process. Both urban and rural women were only slightly empowered to travel alone, even if the visit was to a health facility and with regard to reproductive variables, only 36% of urban women and 18.6% of rural women affirmed their use of contraceptives while 49.5% of urban women and 39% of rural

women admitted they did not want more children. Unsurprisingly, over half of the women had not discussed family planning with their husbands which strikingly highlights the structural inability of women to translate their desires into reproductive action. Nonetheless, it was reported that although spousal communication was critical in determining the reproductive behaviour of women, instances where women have high decision making authority in household affairs, increased contraceptive use and decreased fertility desires were noticed.

Bhatti (2014), in her doctoral dissertation for the University of Edinburgh, highlights how the reproductive agency of women is improving across generations in Punjab, Pakistan as young women are more conscious in their choices as compared to their mothers-in-law and mothers. Her study utilises a sequential mixed methods approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data came from the Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys of 1990-91 and 2006-7 in which the fertility preferences and behaviours of Punjabi women, aged 25-34, were explored. The qualitative data was generated from 75 semi structured interviews of young women, between the ages of 25-34, their mothers, mothers-in-law and husbands to achieve an in-depth understanding of how fertility decisions are negotiated within families and interpersonal relationships across generations. Bhatti worked with the LHWs in Sargodha to gain access to these women who were sampled on the basis of their age, education level and residence of both the woman and the mother-in-law within the tehsil (subdistrict) Sargodha. Her research found that young women were moving away from fatalistic attitudes about family planning and were consciously thinking about family size and its economic ramifications. Young women were also more egalitarian in terms of gender composition with an equal number of sons and daughters or atleast, one of each. They were more willing to consciously space the birth of each child and an increasing use of contraceptives was reported as compared to the older generation. With regard to reproductive agency, Bhatti claims that agency can exist in small, hidden and informal ways. It can even be present in a negotiation, strategic submission, deception, backstage influence or resistance. In line with this, she found that the forms of reproductive agency exercised by the women in Punjab ranged from strategic submission to resistance and often remained within the confines of patriarchy as regulating their reproductive needs/health without the permission of their husbands was still considered disobedient. This is in agreement with the above literature which shows how women continue to exercise their agency in more passive ways if a direct challenge would mean threatening the sanctity of their marriage. Bhatti's

research also found that the state of conjugal relationships was improving and spousal communication was becoming easier and healthier which made it possible for young women to have more agency than the previous generation of women. Albeit limited and still restricted in ways, this proves that younger women exercise more reproductive agency as compared to the older generation of Punjabi women.

The literature review above comprised several research studies across South Asia, specifically, which effectively operationalised and evaluated women's autonomy, empowerment and/or agency with regard to their reproductive and domestic decision-making. These research studies are useful in informing several parts of my research study such as the interview guide and the final analysis of results. Gathering important and common markers of agency and empowerment such as mobility, relationship with husband and in-laws, economic access over resources, etc., I will utilise these to form interview questions for my research study so as to explore how agency in these domains relates to reproductive agency. These research studies also set the tone for the kind of responses I will be expecting from my participants', judging by the limited agency practised by women in India and Pakistan.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this literature review, it is noticeable that none of these researchers focused on how the reproductive experience of women is informed by their unique ethnic or cultural background. Since Muhammad (1996) has reported that ethnicity has an impact on fertility levels in Pakistan due to differences in demand for children, age at marriage, value placed on children and educational levels, etc., this is the primary gap in literature that my research aims to fill by solely focusing on how Memon women exercise reproductive agency. Other than this, most of the literature on reproductive behaviour and agency of women in Pakistan is almost a decade old so my research aims to investigate how young women now negotiate reproductive decision making and exercise reproductive agency.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

I conducted 8 in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are a useful research methodology to gain rich and insightful data from the participants which promote a better understanding of concepts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Especially for sensitive topics which require in-depth discussion, it is important to have detailed conversations with the participants to be able to gain a direct look into their lived experiences. The semi-structured interview approach was chosen as it has been proved effective in fostering reciprocity between the interviewer and the participant (Galletta, 2012). It allows the interviewer to adapt and ask follow-up questions based on the participant's responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), while also providing room for participants to express themselves verbally in their own way. The conversational nature of this data collection method also helps create a more comfortable and casual environment which facilitates the establishment of rapport and trust between the researcher and the participant (Fylan, 2005).

Hence, for this research study in which I intended to ask intimate questions pertaining to the participants' reproductive lives, I believed in-depth, qualitative interviews were the most appropriate. Moreover, since the main research objective aims to extract narratives of agency from the participants' responses, it can only be achieved through detailed, open-ended conversations about participants' lived realities.

Sampling

Criteria

The sampling criteria was the following:

1. Participants must be Memon women and must be married within the Memon community.
2. They must be aged between 18-30 years.

3. They must have been married for equal to or less than five years.
4. They must have at least one child.
5. They must be living with their in-laws in a joint family set-up.

Since the study focused on exploring the unique reproductive experiences and agentic behaviours of Memon women, it became a requirement for them to also have been married into Memon families because if both the families are engaged in similar reproductive customs and habits, the young women are likely to be deeply in touch with the ethnic reproductive experiences. I chose the age bracket 18-30 years because young Memon women tend to be married early, sometimes even before 18 but due to the sensitive nature of this study, the inclusion criteria was set to only permit participants above the legal age of marriage. I set the requirement of marriage to be no more than five years because it's common in Memoni culture for young women to get pregnant within their first year of marriage. However, considering factors like fertility challenges or the conscious choice to delay pregnancy, a five-year timeframe felt appropriate. This period allows women enough time to settle into their in-laws' family and to adjust to their role as mothers. Keeping in mind their likelihood of being married early, I fixed the upper age limit at 30 so all the participants share a homogeneous experience of being married in their twenties or earlier. It was important for all women to have at least one child so as to be able to answer questions about childbirth and the customs attached to it as well as the upbringing of children in a joint Memoni household. Since the experiences of women living in a nuclear and joint family differ considerably (D'Cruz & Bharat, 2001), I wanted all participants to be currently living in a joint family set up so as to ensure that they share similar domestic and reproductive experiences.

Technique

I used convenience and volunteer sampling to recruit 8 participants who belonged to different Memon communities and had different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. First, I made a Google form for recruitment (attached in Appendix A) which consisted of some close-ended questions to gather information about the participants such as their name, their contact numbers and the time at which to contact them so as not to disturb any participant during their

personal time. The Google form also contained information about the research study, the themes of interest which the interview would be focused on and information about the researcher so as to allow personal communication in case of any queries. The participants were also informed of their rights such as the right to withdraw and their right to privacy and confidentiality. The link to this form was posted on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp in which too, I mentioned personal information such as my name, the undergraduate programme I am enrolled in at IBA and that the research study is a thesis project. I also revealed information about the purpose of research study, the recruitment criteria and urged people to contact me in case of any queries so as to avoid potential doubts in any participant. On Facebook, I preferred to post it on community groups such as People of IBA and LUMS, Girls Republic of IBA, The One Where Hindu Takes Sepi and Soul Bitches Official. Since I did not have any Memon-only groups on my Facebook, I posted the Google form for recruitment in groups which might contain Memon women who may not hesitate signing up due to a default sense of trust in the community. The chances of recruiting complete strangers was higher on Facebook so I focused the most on trying to increase the reach of my post there. Nonetheless, I still posted on my personal Instagram account and shared the link to the form in various WhatsApp groups. However, only 5 people signed up through the Google form. The other 3 were recruited through personal contacts where the participants were explained the purpose of the research study and were asked to volunteer of their own free will, if they so chose without the risk of any negative consequences. I reached out to around 5 people through convenience sampling and only 3 showed willingness to volunteer who were then recruited.

Data Collection

Data was collected through 8 online interviews conducted over Zoom. Although initially physical interviews were planned, I switched to online interviews due to travel constraints in the monsoon season in Karachi, Pakistan. I designed the interview brief (attached in Appendix B) focusing on aspects of both general agency and reproductive agency which were primarily observed in similar literature based on women in South Asia, specifically India, Bangladesh and

Pakistan. The section on general agency included themes such as freedom of mobility, choices regarding educational attainment and marriage, financial empowerment and dowry, relationship with husband and in-laws and authority within the family. Within reproductive agency, I decided to include questions concerning choices regarding children and contraceptives, obstetric experience, opinion on motherhood and the unique reproductive traditions of Memons such as a post-birth 40 day stay at maternal home, a customary social event organised by the girl's parents to celebrate the birth of the baby, gifts by both the maternal and paternal families and upbringing of children in a joint Memon family arrangement. The interview brief also included a hypothetical question to assess how the participants would handle a situation in which they had to try to achieve a personal objective. This was added to judge the strategies that the participants may rely on to exercise their agency.

The interview guide was prepared in English but the interviews were conducted in both Urdu and English, judging based on the ease with which the participants conversed in either language. All the participants were sent a consent form (attached in Appendix C) and a participant information sheet (attached in Appendix D) prior to the interviews so that they may have a chance to go through the information sheet which contained details about the research study and ask any questions that come up for them. All the interviews were conducted in a week and were scheduled as per the participants' convenience which meant that interviews were often rescheduled if the participants became busy at the last moment. I had informed all the participants beforehand that the interviews will take 60-90 minutes in total so that they could arrange their time accordingly in order to avoid the interviews being conducted in more than one sitting. A reminder for the interview was shared in the morning of the same day and then 30 minutes prior to the interview as I shared a recurring Zoom link with them which lasted 90 minutes to allow the participants to seamlessly join the same link when the first session expired after 40 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded both on my password-protected phone and laptop for which consent had already been taken. Once the purposes of this research study were fulfilled, I deleted all the audio recordings from both my personal devices.

Although I initially conducted 8 interviews, I decided to discard one because of socially desirable answers by the participant and the refusal to open up about her life even though I had

informed her multiple times that all her data would only stay with me and would remain completely confidential and anonymous. During the interview, I urged her to be as honest as possible but I do not believe her answers were honest so I decided to discard the interview so as not to impact the reliability and validity of my results. In comparison to other interviews which all lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, it was also worth noting that hers only lasted a meagre 30 minutes.

Ethics

Informed consent (Appendix C) was taken from all participants after informing them of the true purpose of the research study, nature of the data collection procedure, any risks and discomfort involved and their rights as a participant. No incentive was provided to any participant for their contribution so their participation was entirely voluntary.

The participants were informed of their rights consistently, beginning from the Google form they signed up through to the participant information sheet which was provided prior to the interviews. The information sheet mentioned that their participation would be completely voluntary and if they wished to withdraw from the study, there would be no negative consequences and their data would be effectively destroyed. They were also informed about their right to confidentiality which was also reiterated in the interviews. The first two questions in the interview brief were to assess the mental state of the participant by asking them how they were and how they were feeling at the moment in order to assure them that if they felt uncomfortable at any stage during the interview then those questions could be skipped. I also assuaged their nervousness, if there was any, by telling them that all the information they shared would stay completely anonymous and no personally identifiable markers would be used so they did not have to fear their identities being revealed in any way. The participants' names were then coded using pseudonyms to respect their confidentiality.

I sensed that the topic of contraceptives may cause discomfort to some of the participants since it is not usually discussed openly or without shame so I assured the participants that they were free

to inform me if they wished to skip any questions. However, it was refreshing to observe that none of the participants shied from discussing the topic.

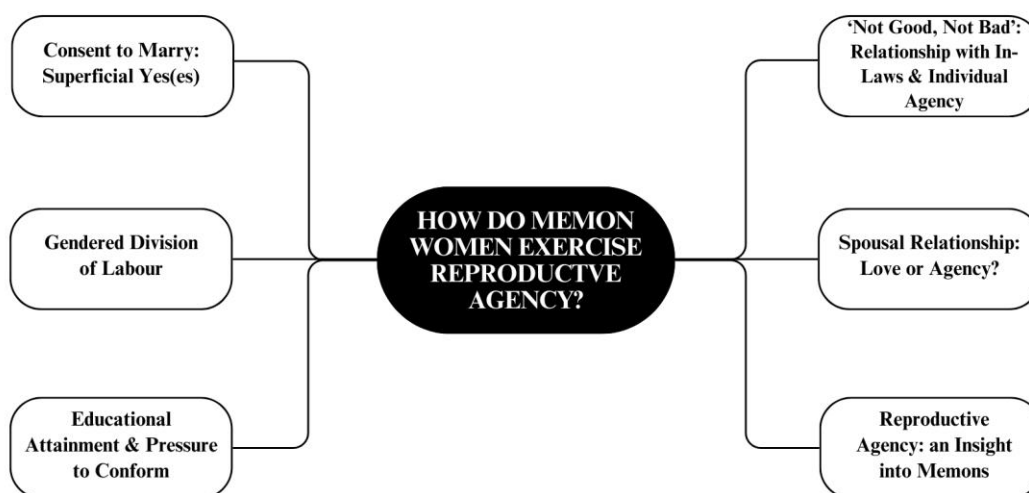
Data Analysis

All the audio recordings were manually transcribed on Google Docs which was chosen for its convenience as it auto-saves every edit unlike Microsoft Word where you may fear losing your data. Google Docs is also accessible only through my personal email account so all the transcriptions were kept in a password protected file. Listening to the interviews to transcribe and then going through them again a few times allowed me to get familiar with the contents which enabled me to look for consistent patterns in responses to come up with themes and subthemes.

Since the interview brief had been divided mainly under two overarching themes which were general agency and reproductive agency, I then looked for further themes to organise the data. Keeping both the transcriptions and the interview brief in juxtaposition, a final list of themes emerged. However, under each theme, several sub-themes seemed to appear based on the participants' responses. Then, I named all the themes and assigned colours to each in order to effectively colour code the transcriptions. Using the highlight feature in Google Docs, I used the relevant colour codes to highlight corresponding sections of the interviews. Once the primary themes had been finalised, the interview guide was also categorised such that questions pertaining to each theme were clubbed together. For future researchers, this fosters transparency and allows for replicability and comparative analyses as well as to explore the nuances of formulating questions to achieve the best responses. The demographic information of all the participants has been consolidated in a table (attached in Appendix E). Following this, all the findings were reported in Chapter 4 of this thesis in the form of a detailed analysis on the reproductive agency of Memon women.

Chapter 4: Results & Discussion

In this section, the results and discussion are integrated to provide a comprehensive and detailed analysis, following an extensive thematic evaluation. The primary themes which emerged from the thematic analysis are mentioned below (also attached in Appendix F with their colour codes and sub-themes).



01: Educational Attainment and Pressure to Conform

The interview responses reflected varying degrees of agency with regard to educational attainment. Mostly the decision to either continue studies or leave them altogether were the participants' personal decisions, albeit being rarely informed by personal desires. P1 exhibited great agency in pursuing her academic aspirations as she continued her education after marriage and is even studying currently to fulfil some requirements in order to pursue a Masters degree. She expressed, *"Yes, it was my decision. Completely."* to continue studying despite marriage and motherhood. However, she had taken a break when her daughter was born and is continuing her education now after a few years which shows that even though she does exercise agency over her

life decisions, they are still somewhat shaped by the traditional gender roles where a mother has to look after her children in their initial years. P2, on the other hand, did not pursue further academic education after her A Levels but instead, preferred to study religion for which she took a two-year course which was completed after her marriage. However, she expressed an original desire to become an *Aalimah* (religious scholar) which she had to give up due to marriage since it is a difficult, formalised degree which is six years long. Even though she had to conform to societal expectations within Memons to get married early, she showed agency in her decisions to achieve what she wanted, even if it meant a two-year course instead of a six-year one. She also said, “*when she (her daughter) gets a little bigger, then Inshallah, I'll do it*” to express her wish to continue her education which highlights agency over her life decisions and their timeline.

P3 displayed remarkable resolve in achieving her academic goals as she continued her education despite marriage and childbirth. She claimed, “*I went to the university and I continued even like 20 days after my baby because I had my final exams*” and also shared her reasoning behind this decision, “*So, basically, I just thought that if I took a break, it would be a very long break...I know I would be birthing a baby and all that...but, I didn't want myself to be demotivated or for anyone around me to think that, you know, she is free to be at home. And I don't mean that in a demeaning way. It's just that I wanted to complete my education.*” This shows that she exercised complete and direct agency over her decision to complete her academic goals and did not let anyone else sway her decision. When she stated that she did not want anyone to think that she was free to be at home, it implied that if she had taken a break, it may have signalled to the people around her (in-laws) that she could be pressured into not going back. By being aware of the potential realities of staying at home, she took a personal decision to achieve what she wanted which exhibits a clear sense of agency in her personal life.

In contrast, P4's decision to quit her university was a result of getting pregnant soon after her wedding. Her university degree entailed a lot of market visits and practical work which made it difficult for her to continue. However, she knew that it would not be possible to continue her education if she got pregnant or even after childbirth but due to pressure from her husband to prioritise childbirth over her education, she conformed to Memoni societal expectations of getting pregnant as soon as possible after a young couple's wedding. In response to a follow-up

question on whether she knew it would be difficult for her to continue her studies, she said, “*yeah I had the idea but he (husband) was like ho jayega (it will happen) and my degree also included practical work...so it has not been possible till now.*” P5 also exhibits considerable control over her personal life as she chose to complete her education before getting married. She has a Masters degree, during which she met her current husband and they proceeded to marry once both of them were settled in their careers. Thus, she was the most agentic out of all the participants towards her educational attainment. P6 also quit her Bachelors degree because she could not manage domestic responsibilities simultaneously which created implicit pressure from her mother-in-law and she also got pregnant soon after her marriage which made it difficult for her to stay on top of everything. Her own parents then also forced her to prioritise her domestic responsibilities over her educational attainment. Her inability to take a stand for herself then has created deep regret in her now as she expressed her feelings by saying, “*I wish I had never left my studies...*”

Likewise, P7 also had to discontinue her ACCA degree because she got pregnant soon after her marriage. Unlike P6, she faced no pressures from her in-laws or birth family to quit her studies but it was a personal decision, informed by societal expectations of a mother. However, her agency can not be completely dismissed since it is her personal decision to wait right now and continue her education once her child grows a little, despite repeated encouragement from family to go for it now. Hence, this section reveals the complex interplay between choices regarding educational attainment and the subtle ways that Memon women exercise their agency such as strategic compromises and choosing to wait.

02: Gendered Division of Labour

The interviews highlight the traditional gender roles that are common in Memon households, where women are typically responsible for household chores and childcare, while men work outside the home. P1 is a working mother so she gets up early to get her children ready for school then takes a one hour nap and gets ready for work herself. Once she comes back from work, her day revolves around her children and household chores. This is typical of working

mothers in a patriarchal structure and has been aptly called the “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) which describes the additional burden on employed mothers to take care of childrearing and domestic responsibilities after a paid day at work, outside the home.

This behaviour is also shared by P5 who is also a working mother and works a full time shift from 9-5 after which she comes home to take care of her child and pending chores around the house: *“then I go back to home at 6.30. I spend time with him and I also get done with all of my house chores as well.”* P3, although not employed, is a full-time student and shares a similar routine where she has to tend to her child after coming home from university. This second shift can get extra tiring for women and also cause them to resent their roles of ‘having to do it all’ while their husbands are primarily responsible for work outside the home. P3 also shares that most of her day is spent feeding and taking care of her child which leaves little time for herself. This demonstrates how women balance their domestic responsibilities alongside their professional ambitions as strategic compromise to avoid any obstacles in pursuing their professional goals.

P2, P4, P6 and P7 are all stay-at-home mothers and all of them share the same experience of being responsible for domestic and child rearing duties while their husbands are the primary breadwinners of their family. This is not only common in Memoni households but such a setting is preferred by both young men and their parents which is why young girls are sought for marriage as it is easy to get them to compromise and adjust in the family. However, within their accepted dynamics, these women also exercise agency as they make time for themselves and prioritise their rest and self care. As both P4 and P7 highlighted, their nap-time is very important for them during the day which is time they have reserved for themselves, as recounted by P7, *“then 4:30 or 5:30 his nap time and my nap time, which is important.”* This is significant for them to retain their individuality and give some time to themselves to rest or relax. Hence, in each of these cases, while these women often adhere to conventional gender roles, they still assert moments of control and agency in various aspects of their daily lives.

03: Consent to Marry: Superficial Yes(es)?

While all the participants agreed to have given their consent for marriage, most of them responded in the affirmative when I asked them if they would have waited given a choice. This highlights a culture of superficial yes(es) or consent in which either parents only ask the girl for the sake of it or the girl agrees to a proposal because of communal or familial expectations within Memons to get married at a certain age. P1 exemplifies this by saying, *“I knew I would say yes, no matter whatever it was. Even if it was a no, I wouldn't have said no.”* She felt she had to say yes because her mother was a single parent and she couldn't disappoint her. However, she also shared that she was only 18 at the time and when one is that young, it is only natural that their perspectives would differ than in their twenties but at the time of the interview, she mentioned she was glad that it happened when it did because now, she has a well-settled life as opposed to her colleagues who are still *“struggling”* in life. By struggling, she meant they were not even married and also worked under her at work. So, in her own way, she did end up getting a happy ending. However, this is not how some other participants felt about their early marriages. P6 was also married at the age of 18 and shared that she would have waited if she was given a choice. Although her consent was also sought, it was artificial since she knew that saying no would have negative consequences and so, under pressure from her family, she said yes. After 5 years of marriage, she still holds the opinion that she was not ready at the time of marriage which caused a lot of problems for her later on when she started expecting and had to quit her studies, it became very difficult for her to accept everything and adjust to her new life. She started resenting her husband and even her new-born who had come into this world earlier than she wanted.

P2 believed that her consent was genuine and if she had said no then her parents would have rejected the proposal but since everything she wanted in a husband was being fulfilled, she did not feel the need to say no. Nevertheless, she admitted that if there was no *“Memon pressure”*, she would have preferred to wait a few years to marry. P3 had a rather interesting story of how she finally said yes after eight months of thinking about it. Her husband and herself knew each other since childhood and their fathers were business partners so when the proposal came, her parents hesitated telling her because they were on a trip together and they did not want the

participant to act out so once they got home, she was informed and told, “*you can take all the time you need, but this is the answer.*” Again, although consent was formally taken, it was not genuine because her parents had already decided on her behalf. Nonetheless, she exercised her agency in taking her sweet time to weigh the pros and cons of accepting the proposal and thought that since her husband was only a year older than her, she would be able to exercise more freedom if she married him than accepting any other proposal she had been receiving. She, too, would have waited if she could so as to complete her university before marriage because currently, she was having to ‘do it all’ which can be overwhelming.

P4’s consent was genuine as she believed she was ready and would not have wanted to wait since there were no problems with the proposal as both the family and her potential husband seemed good. She also had plenty of time to mentally prepare for marriage as her engagement lasted a year and then she got *nikkah-fied* (married legally and Islamically) which again lasted a year before her *rukhsati* (bride going away to the groom’s house as part of the wedding ceremony). She was content with her relationship since her in-laws also had a positive view about education and she believed she would be able to complete it after marriage. Unlike all other participants who had an arranged marriage, P5 was the only one who had a love marriage which means her consent was automatically involved and valued: “*I was ready because it was my choice.*” Not only the choice of spouse but also the time of marriage were decided directly by her so she exercised great control and agency over her personal life decisions.

P7’s consent was also genuinely sought not just by her parents but by the whole extended family since she lived in a joint family and was the eldest daughter in the house. She informed me that even after her engagement, her uncles used to ask her if she is happy and if everything is okay which shows that they honestly cared about her happiness. However, she still confirmed that “*if I had a choice, I would have waited but I left everything to my father*” which shows that even when young girls are happy with their partners, they are not necessarily satisfied with the timing of their marriage. This showcases the broader social landscape in which young girls may be able to assert their agency in choice of spouse but a lot of them fail to change the ethnic norms of early marriages and conform to satisfy familial expectations.

03a: Ideal Age vs Actual Age

The participants' responses highlighted an ironic difference between the ideal age of marriage vs the actual age at which they got married. This directly shows the distance that is yet to be covered with regard to women empowerment and autonomy in Memon families. P1 was married at 18 but the ideal age for marriage, according to her, is between 20-24 for girls and 25-28 for boys so they're older and more mature. P2 was married at 19, though she believes women should marry later, ideally after completing their education. She suggested that the ideal age for marriage is between 22 and 24, allowing for more maturity and life experience. P3 shared a similar view, as she was married at 20, which she considers young. Like P2, she also believes that one should prioritise their education, mentioning that the ideal time for marriage is after completing university. Their emphasis on the importance of finishing university before getting married demonstrates their sense of personal agency, even though their own experience differed. P3 also advocates for her sisters to not be married early, mentioning: *"I mean, since I used to believe this before as well. But it just didn't work out the same way for me. But I would actually, you know, I would still tell my parents. Because I have three younger sisters. And you know how the Memon ideology is. So, I keep on telling my parents that you should at least be done with your university. When you should get married. Because it's just too chaotic. It's tough to manage."* This is also evidence of the agency she demonstrates now, even if she couldn't change her own reality.

P4, who married at 22, stated that the ideal age for marriage is 23-24, while for boys it should be at least 26 since they are *"children at 22"*. P5 offered a different perspective, challenging the notion of a fixed "right" age for marriage. She married at 25 and emphasised that people should marry when they feel personally ready, rather than adhering to a societal timeline. Her opinion is consistent with the agency she practised in determining the timing of her own marriage which was when she personally felt ready. P6 also shares a similar mindset as the other participants that the ideal age for marriage for girls is after 20 or 22, even though she was married at 18 and for boys, it is 27-28 when they are well-settled in their careers. P7, who married at 21, believed that marriage should ideally occur after completing education and achieving financial stability, if that is what one wants in life. Her opinions were similar to those of P5 as she claimed that one should

get married only when they feel ready and that ideally, there should not be much of an age gap between the spouses. Together, these narratives illustrate a complex negotiation between societal norms and personal agency, with each woman reflecting on her own experiences while imagining different choices for herself. Their reflections on what they consider the 'right' age indicate a desire for greater personal agency in making such decisions while also signifying some conformity with traditional gender norms as most of them believed that husbands should be older, more mature and well-settled at the time of marriage.

04: 'Not Good, Not Bad': Relationship with In-Laws & Individual Agency

Currently live in a joint-family set up with their in-laws, all of these women admitted to tensions in the household due to living together. The participants' narratives convey an intricately designed web of domestic responsibilities, familial expectations and personal agency which these women navigate through each day. The opportunity to make their relationship better with their in-laws manifested in either simplistic desires to be able to confront them to major decisions such as living separately. P1 describes her relationship with her in-laws as "*not really bad, not very good even*" as some family dynamics and financial problems in the family caused tensions and created rifts in the relationships which couldn't be repaired. She says that she prefers to keep her distance now and minds her business. She also does not believe she can openly communicate with her in-laws because there is no point in arguing and it is better to let things go. She practises agency in her decision to maintain boundaries and focus her energy on her own family instead of trying to make everyone else happy because that will lead to good relationships with her own children and a well-settled life. P2, on the other hand, shares a good relationship with her in-laws as she observed that her husband's family was very important to him and he also respected her family greatly so she, in turn, decided to extend the same courtesy towards him and maintain a good relationship with his family. However, she is currently feeling overwhelmed and burdened as she struggles to manage both childrearing and domestic responsibilities simultaneously and has decided to talk to her mother-in-law about it. She believes she can communicate openly with her mother-in-law about this problem and it will get resolved.

P3 describes her relationship with her in-laws in a similar fashion as P1 as *“fine, not too friendly and not too hostile”*. She repeated that *“it’s fine”* and went on to discuss how she struggles to find common topics of discussion between herself and her mother-in-law without creating unnecessary drama or arguments. When conversation surrounding her ‘safe’ topics such as her husband also started leading to fights between her mother-in-law and her husband, P3 retracted her steps and now prefers to mostly stay silent and listen to her talk. However, to improve their relationship, she feels she needs to learn to speak up for herself as she shies from confrontations and would rather remove herself from an uncomfortable situation. She also believes that she would want to move out to improve not just her relationship with her in-laws but also with her husband. P4 also shared that although her relationship with her in-laws is good overall, there are a few things which she does not like such as a lack of privacy and an inability to discuss her personal desires. She feels she can not communicate openly with them about *“how often I want to go to my maternal home and how often I want to meet my friends like I meet them from my mom’s so these are things that I can’t share.”* She also avoids confrontation and rather conforms to the in-laws expectations as she only meets her friends when she is at her maternal home and never from her in-laws house. She claims that if her in-laws are friendlier and more considerate towards her, their relationship could improve.

P5 shares a positive relationship with her in-laws as their mindsets and values align which, according to her, is an important factor towards their bonding. Towards the rest of the family, she maintains a boundary and minds her own business to avoid conflicts. Nonetheless, she also wishes to move out of Pakistan and live in a nuclear family set up in future, although this decision may not be as informed by her relationship with her in-laws as it may be by her desires to want a better life for her son. She also mentions that she can not always share her opinions in moments of dissent and would rather stay neutral to avoid anyone getting offended, explaining: *“I cannot disregard their opinions very bluntly. I need to ensure that, you know, I don’t give my opinions always, which may not be as per what their opinions are. I would just stay neutral in all matters.”* True to the theme name, P6 described her relationship with her in-laws as *“not good, not bad”* as she can not communicate with them openly and also blames them for pressuring her into leaving her education and now, being stuck at home unable to do something for herself. She also shared that her in-laws favour her *devrani* (younger sister-in-law) over her since she is

educated and well-accomplished so she is also exempted from domestic chores which have now become entirely her responsibility. In response to the question about how her relationship with her in-laws could improve, she expressed she had no idea which might imply that she has given up hope of improving the relationship at all and resigned to her role within the family. P7 mentioned that she is not too close with her in-laws since she has two *jethanis* (older sister-in-laws) who have already bonded with her mother-in-law and she feels it is difficult to compete with both of them so she is not very close to her mother-in-law. She also told me that she had learnt to not share her feelings with anyone, except for her husband because in a joint family, one can not trust the other sister-in-laws who may tell others. So she prefers to only share her feelings with her husband and in case of a problem, she prefers her husband to tell her how to manage it or do it himself so she can avoid the confrontation. She believes if she was the first daughter-in-law in the family, her relationship with her in-laws may have been better but it is fine as it is currently since it is still respectful and courteous.

All of these answers display a certain level of passivity in these women's family lives which may be evident of a strategic compromise to be able to freely exercise their agency in other spheres such as going out with their friends or their relationships with their spouses. Even women who showed high personal agency in choosing a spouse for themselves or their educational attainment such as P5 and P3 share that they would prefer to avoid confrontations and stay neutral instead of sharing their honest opinions in a conversation. Questions about dowry also garnered interesting responses where all participants, except for P2, had brought some form of dowry but often did not consider it as a burden, rather a "*tradition that can not be broken*" or "*my personal items only*". P1 thought that, "*in Memons, you don't ask for it. It's mandatory, you know. You give it. Yeh tou hoga hi* (this will happen)." P3 claimed that even though she understood her parents desire to provide dowry for her, she would have "lashed out" if her in-laws had demanded it from them which they did not. In most cases, either the in-laws remained silent so there was an understood assumption that dowry was to be given or they refused initially but accepted it when it was being offered to them. Hence, these narratives reveal that even women who might consider themselves to be active agents in their personal lives, may be victims of traditional norms that are much too powerful for them to dismiss, even mentally.

04a: Is Classic Patriarchy Still in Action?

Kandiyoti (1988) stated in his article, *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, that classic patriarchy may be found in countries like India and Pakistan. Although Memon family structures are typically patriarchal, I wanted to test if classic patriarchy still exists in Memoni families so I asked questions pertaining to authority distribution within the family to get an idea of how power dynamics within the family inform decisions for each member. These interviews, thus, provided insight into the decision-making process within Memon households, where patriarchal structures are still evident, though the participants sometimes demonstrated moments of agency within these hierarchies. In P1's household, the typical hierarchy does not exist because the older siblings influence the decision of the mother-in-law and father-in-law and since P1 and her husband are the youngest, they are most often not even consulted in major decisions. P2, on the other hand, observes a somewhat typical patriarchal structure where decisions are usually taken by the older man who is the father-in-law and then the mother-in-law. However, for the rest of the family, everyone shares an equal position where their opinions are valued and respected regardless of age or gender differences. P3's family also practises a classic patriarchal system in which the men usually make the decisions with the father-in-law having the most authority, followed by the mother-in-law who discusses all decisions with her daughters, and then the younger men of the family. Upon asking where she would be placed within this hierarchy, she replied that she is not consulted as such which highlights that she has accepted her inferior position of power within the family and hopes to exercise her agency through a strong spousal relationship.

P4 notes a similar patriarchal hierarchy with her father-in-law being at the top who would be responsible for most of the decisions then her mother-in-law and her husband share an equal amount of authority followed by the girls in the family. P4's family shares the most resemblance to Kandiyoti's description of classic patriarchy in which older men have the most authority followed by younger men and older women and then lastly, younger women. P5 claims that in her in-laws family, all the decisions are taken collectively but if a hierarchy had to be made, it would be her father-in-law at the top then her mother-in-law then her husband and herself (*"we are one unit"*) and then the sisters. So, even when P5 believes that decisions are usually taken

jointly, when she was asked to think about a hierarchy, a purely patriarchal one emerged. P6 believes that her sister-in-law's and younger brother-in-law hold the most authority as they have the power to influence every decision. P7 claims that her mother-in-law holds the most authority as all decisions go through her and she is consulted in everything. In addition to this, after the mother-in-law and father-in-law, all siblings are treated equally.

It was also unsurprising to learn that daughter-in-laws are rarely consulted in family decisions and when they are, it's mostly about domestic concerns such as day-to-day affairs, hosting events, giving gifts, travel, home decorations, etc. Matters regarding business, finances, property, etc. are always taken by men and the older woman. However, participants admitted to having the ability to convince their husbands so they indirectly exercise their agency by influencing their husbands' decisions. So, even though the remnants of classic patriarchy are alive and well, family structures and systems are still evolving, albeit much slower than appreciated.

05: Spousal Relationship: Love or Agency?

The interview responses revealed a complex dynamic between love and agency in spousal relationships, where women negotiate personal agency while leveraging the strength of their marital relationship to exercise agency in various areas of life. Most participants described their husbands as non-confrontational or calm, which allows them to express themselves freely within the relationship. P1 related how her husband *“absorbs everything out and takes it very calmly”* when she vents her frustrations, noting that he *“just takes it, haan, theek hai. It's okay.”* This dynamic allows her to assert her emotional agency without fear of conflict, though she also acknowledges the lack of emotional reciprocity, as her husband is *“not very expressive”* and doesn't initiate affection or surprises as she recounted that he had never surprised her in all of their years of marriage, leaving her to manage the emotional labour of the relationship. P2 also described her husband as *“very cool-tempered”* as she noted that, *“it's been 4 years and he has never yelled at me. I say don't you get mad at me?”* This sets the tone for their relationship where the love and support she receives from her husband allows her to exercise agency in other areas

of life. For example, she shared how her husband's unwavering support through her struggles with miscarriages and mental health challenges allowed her to seek therapy without fear of judgement: "*He never told me that I was crazy... He always supported me.*" This emotional support not only strengthened her personal resilience but also enabled her to take control of her mental health, demonstrating how love can serve as a foundation for asserting agency in sensitive and personal matters. Leveraging her spousal relationship, P2 has also managed to carve a place for herself within her husband's family as she maintains boundaries through her husband: "*In the beginning, we used to go out more with the whole family. So I told him that I need some of my time. Like we need our time because we live with the family and we don't have our own time. So he took this decision that we will go out on three Sundays and one Sunday with the whole family.*" Likewise, P3 described how her husband's willingness to support her in front of their joint family allows her to maintain her personal identity and autonomy within that context. She explains that her husband never blames her publicly, saying, "*He would never be like, yes, she did this,*" which helps preserve her respect and authority within the family. This support allows her to assert her agency more comfortably within the joint family setup, using the strength of their relationship as a shield against potential criticism or undermining. P5 also positively described her relationship with her husband whose appreciation for her efforts helps "*keep the spark alive*" in their relationship. She owes the success of her relationship to the alignment and consistency between their values and goals as a couple which help them grow together with mutual love, respect and support.

In contrast, traditional gender roles and family expectations may further complicate women's ability to express agency within the marriage, even when love and support exists. P4, for example, expressed a desire for more quality time and privacy with her husband, but she noted that family obligations, particularly involving her husband's sisters, often take precedence. She shared that "*whenever we go somewhere, his sisters always join us, and I don't like that,*" reflecting how the involvement of extended family can infringe on the couple's time and her personal desires. The influence of family expectations also manifested in one of her other responses where she told me that her husband was looking for "*a girl who would take care of him like his mother and babies him.*" This highlights a dynamic where P4 is expected to shoulder all the domestic and emotional burden so her husband can be 'taken care of'. P7, for instance,

described how her “bossy” tendencies lead to tension when her husband gets angry. Albeit characterising him as “very calm”, she explained, “If he gets angry for two minutes, he forgets about it the next minute. But I keep thinking about it all day... I’ll keep fighting with him.” Here, the dynamic between love and agency is complicated by the gendered expectations of how anger and emotional expression are managed within the relationship. While her husband may quickly move on, her extended emotional response suggests a power imbalance in how conflict is processed, reflecting the ongoing challenge of exercising emotional agency within the confines of traditional gender roles. While all the participants initially described their spousal relationship as good before delving into details, P6 responded that she was “surviving” in hers. When probed further, she explained that if her husband had taken a stand for her in the early years of her marriage or had been more empathetic and considerate towards her needs, they might have had a better relationship today but currently, she was only in it for her children. While this demonstrates some agency in her decision to continue her marriage for the sake of her children, it glaringly points out her inability to make her marital situation better which in turn affects her emotional and mental peace. This highlights a recurring theme where love and support in the spousal relationship do not necessarily translate into full agency, especially when family expectations and obligations come into play.

Overall, the participants’ narratives illustrated how love and agency are deeply interconnected in these spousal relationships, with women often leveraging the strength of their marital relationship to assert themselves in different areas of life. However, the extent to which they can exercise agency varies depending on the specific dynamics of the relationship, as well as the influence of family hierarchies and traditional gender roles. Ultimately, these women navigate a delicate balance between love, agency, and societal norms, using their relationships as both a means of empowerment and a site of negotiation.

05a: Who Decides What: Decision-Making as a Couple

While discussing decision making within their relationship, all participants affirmed that they make most decisions jointly, as a couple. However, most of them shared that these collective

decisions do not extend to finances such as how to spend or invest money. P5 mentioned that she and her husband are equal partners in decision-making and emphasised that *“if either one of us is not onboarded on a specific thing, we just can’t do it.”* This shared approach is sustained in matters traditionally considered ‘men’s decisions’ such as finances: *“there’s 100% transparency in our relationship with regards to finances, any decision-making.”* Her interview reflects a collaborative form of agency, where both partners contribute equally to decisions that affect their lives. P1 echoed this sentiment by saying, *“mostly all decisions are made collectively with the husband. I have the power to convince him as well.”* P1 and P5 are the only two women from the sample who are employed full-time and are able to assert their opinions and exercise agency in joint decisions, even if they are related to finances. This suggests that their expertise in a professional setting is appreciated and respected by their husbands which affords them more agency than the other women. Nonetheless, P3 also lamented, *“I think we are pretty much involved in every decision, we would at least talk about it if not taking the other person’s opinion.”* Hence, maybe enough love and respect in a relationship does triumph all so as to allow P3 to exert her agency by maintaining that everything needs to be discussed before decided.

P4 discusses how her father-in-law dominates family decisions, explaining that when it comes to matters concerning the family, her father-in-law takes the decisions while her role is more equal only in decisions about her daughter and other domestic matters such as travel or everyday affairs where she doesn’t *“let him (her husband) take the upper hand”*. P6 and P7 both shared that decisions with their relationship are mostly taken collectively, except for finances. P7 described in detail how her husband takes the lead on financial matters, despite discussing decisions with her: *“He takes opinions but ultimately, it’s his decision.”* In these cases, traditional gender roles and family hierarchies shape how much agency women can exercise, particularly in areas like financial management or broader family decisions.

05b: Is Money a Symbol of Power?

Participants’ varied responses highlight how money operates as a symbol of power in relationships, yet each woman exercises direct or indirect agency in different ways. Despite

being employed, P1's husband provides for her monthly expenses as she mentioned, *"My money, I usually save it out. But his money usually takes care of all the expenses and everything."* This shows that while she relies on him, she retains control over her personal finances. Additionally, her ability to ask for more money when needed demonstrates a direct yet dependent form of agency exercised through communication and negotiation. P2 has more freedom, expressing, *"I do whatever I want. I spend as much as I want."* Her access to a card with no spending limit grants her autonomy, though she remains financially dependent on her husband. P3 illustrated a more complex dynamic, admitting, *"I hate asking for stuff."* Her reluctance to request financial support, despite knowing she can, reflects a quiet assertion of independence. She prefers to manage on her own, even though her husband has offered, *"Even if he has told me to take his money... I would not take it again."* This hesitation shows how she exercises agency by avoiding dependency, despite the availability of resources. However, she also values the Islamic framework that positions her husband as the provider but at the same time admits to wanting to contribute in her own way, reflecting a complex interplay of cultural expectations and personal agency.

In contrast, P5 represents a more egalitarian relationship as she is financially independent: *"there is no pocket money or a monthly concept or things that we have kept fixed...He does it on his own. My expenses, I do it. I do it on my own. Whenever we need each other's support or help, the other person would already know. And we know that we can, you know, simply ask each other and share. There are things that we have divided that I would pay for the nanny, you would pay for the school fee."* By dividing financial responsibilities, she and her husband have established a partnership, which reduces the power imbalance present in more traditional setups and allows her to exercise more overt financial agency compared to others. P7 also exerts some quiet control by secretly saving part of her allowance as she confessed, *"I save almost half of it but I don't tell him."* While she must explain her spending to her husband if she needs more, her private savings show a form of covert financial independence.

P4 and P6 both experience a more traditional form of money management within the relationship where they are given a fixed amount of money for their personal expenses and if required, they may ask for more. Although their ability to ask is a sign of dependence, the freedom to request

and receive what they need also indicates their agency in navigating financial support. These narratives make it clear that each woman navigates the power dynamics of financial dependence differently. Whether through saving money, deciding when and how to ask for more, or negotiating shared responsibilities, their agency is expressed in small, often subtle ways. This demonstrates that power in relationships is not solely about control of resources but also about how individuals manoeuvre within these structures to maintain their sense of autonomy.

06: Reproductive Agency: an Insight into Memons

Participants' offered a complex portrait of reproductive agency, where each participant's journey reflected distinct methods of navigating, negotiating, and determining their reproductive choices. P1 believes that the right age for a woman to conceive is two years after her wedding so she can get closer to her husband and become "*physically, mentally, and financially ready*". However, her own experience differed as she got married within a year of her marriage and expressed that she was too immature and young to think about the realities of having children then. Even so, she knew that "*this shouldn't happen suddenly... and we planned for it accordingly. Like after six months, we planned for it.*" This highlights her reproductive agency in the initial year of her marriage when she may not have been mature enough to decide to consciously delay her pregnancy as she believes should happen but she still planned it when she was ready to and wanted to. P1's reproductive agency is also evident in how she and her husband reached an agreement on the number of children. While her husband initially wanted more than two, P1 was firm about having two children. She explained, "*My husband wanted more, but now he understands the circumstances... I still want two kids.*" This shows her ability to influence decisions through communication and mutual understanding. Even when discussing contraceptives, she stated that the decision to use condoms was a "*mutual decision,*" reflecting a collaborative yet assertive approach to reproductive health after she had another invasive contraceptive removed due to adverse side effects to her health.

However, when it came to choosing a doctor during her pregnancy, P1's in-laws initially had more influence, as she admits, "*My in-laws' family decided... because it was obvious they go to*

that particular doctor. So I had to go there.” While accommodating family preferences and compromising in certain reproductive areas, she gained leverage in others such as her reproductive choices with her husband in matters of family size and contraception. This is a typical example of a patriarchal bargain as theorised by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988). P2 presented a narrative of both personal and shared decision-making, exemplified by how she and her husband mutually agreed to delay having children to focus on their relationship. She recalled, *“We mutually decided about it after marriage... we wanted to give some time to our relationship.”* This illustrated her agency in defining reproductive goals in collaboration with her husband. Despite wanting to wait, external pressures from family and societal expectations surfaced after her marriage, yet P2 continued to resist until she felt prepared. Her reproductive challenges, including complications from PCOS and miscarriages, led her to engage actively in her reproductive healthcare. Despite societal and family pressures against contraceptive use, P2 remained firm in her belief that reproductive decisions should be solely hers and her husband’s: *“No one else can change it. And no one should do it either.”* This strong stance demonstrated her personal agency and resilience in the face of cultural expectations. When choosing doctors, P2 also showed agency by consulting her preferred doctor, explaining, *“I opted for the doctor who was treating me.”* However, on her mother-in-law’s insistence, she eventually shifted to a doctor of her choice at Aga Khan since all the family’s children had been delivered there. Her decision to shift to Aga Khan but choosing a doctor of her preference highlights the indirect demonstration of her agency through which she, even in an unwanted situation, did end up achieving her desired outcome.

P3 portrayed a more nuanced form of reproductive agency, initially resisting the idea of having children. She stated, *“I wanted no kids, but I knew somewhere down there I would want one,”* indicating an internal conflict. Her husband, however, wanted two children, and this difference in desires became a space for negotiation. Eventually, P3 had a child, but she admitted that her views haven’t entirely changed and still considers having only one as she tells her husband: *“The most you’re getting is one.”* This reluctance to have more children shows her reproductive agency, albeit subtly expressed through resistance. Her narrative of using contraceptives also reflects an assertion of her agency, especially against family pressures. She recalled how her family found out she was on contraceptive pills, leading to disapproval from her in-laws and

mother. Despite this opposition, P3 maintained her decision, showing her ability to navigate family pressure while prioritising her reproductive health. Even when faced with an unsatisfactory experience with a doctor, she asserted control by changing doctors, highlighting her determination to exercise choice in her healthcare.

P4 reflected a more indirect form of agency, where her husband's preferences heavily influenced their family planning decisions. She explained that despite discussing not wanting children early on, her husband convinced her otherwise. Although this may seem like an absence of agency, P4 eventually negotiated her own preferences after their first child by initiating the use of condoms for family planning. She said, *"I talked to him and made him understand, and then we went for condoms,"* showing her gradual assertion in reproductive decisions. She also exercised agency in her healthcare, particularly when she decided to change doctors after being dissatisfied with the one recommended by her sister. She recalled, *"I wasn't that satisfied... she was a little rude, so I decided to change the doctor."* Her ability to influence her husband and mother-in-law regarding doctor visits, despite initial resistance, showcases how she navigated these decisions within the family structure. She noted, *"I talked to him (husband), and slowly he started understanding,"* reflecting how she subtly shifted the dynamics in her favour over time.

P5 showcased a more overt form of reproductive agency, as she and her husband planned their reproductive goals in advance, agreeing to wait *"two to three years"* before having children to enjoy life as a couple. This deliberate planning demonstrates her control over the timing of her pregnancies. She emphasised that her decision-making was shared with her husband, but her desire to wait indicates a clear exercise of autonomy. In terms of family planning, she and her husband decided on using condoms, a method she felt more comfortable with due to concerns about the side effects of other contraceptives. This demonstrated her informed decision-making and how her fears about health risks shaped her reproductive choices.

P6, on the other hand, illustrated a more constrained form of agency, initially influenced by her husband to forgo contraceptive use on their wedding night, despite her own desire to delay pregnancy. She recalled, *"I did not want to, but I got convinced."* This example reflects passivity in her reproductive behaviours where her husband's reasoning that delaying children might

hinder fertility affected her choices. However, after her first child, P6 regained some control over her reproductive choices, shifting to the use of condoms, albeit with discomfort. Her statement, *“I was not comfortable so I suggested pull out and left it to God,”* reveals how she negotiated her own comfort while balancing cultural and religious beliefs. Her experience during pregnancy, feeling unready and overwhelmed, demonstrated the psychological struggle tied to reproductive decisions. She recalled crying upon learning she was pregnant, but her husband’s religious reasoning (*“God would be upset with me”*) led her to suppress her doubts. Despite this, her later engagement with contraceptive methods shows a gradual reclamation of agency.

P7 represented another form of subtle reproductive agency, where initial plans to delay pregnancy due to her education were disrupted by an unplanned pregnancy three months into her marriage despite the use of contraceptives. However, her practice of agency is clear in how she navigated her use of contraceptives, choosing condoms and making informed decisions with her husband. She explained, *“It was a mutual decision because there were no other options, I was not going to take birth control pills”* Her ability to convince her husband to use condoms, despite his reservations, further highlights her negotiation skills: *“Although he had reservations... he also agreed that I should not take birth control pills.”* Although her reproductive timeline was altered, her narrative shows that she regained control in subsequent decisions. She also exercised agency in dealing with family pressures, particularly when choosing her doctor. Despite her mother-in-law’s suggestion to go to a doctor at Medicare, she insisted on going to Aga Khan Hospital, showing her determination to choose her own healthcare provider despite familial preferences.

In conclusion, the participants’ responses revealed a spectrum of reproductive agency, ranging from overt decision-making to subtle negotiations and indirect influence. While some women exercised clear autonomy in setting reproductive goals and choosing contraceptive methods, others navigated cultural and familial expectations with more subtle forms of resistance and compromise.

06a: Memoni Reproductive Traditions

The reproductive agency of Memon women is deeply intertwined with longstanding traditions such as the 40-day postpartum stay at the maternal home, the ‘aana’ (an event organised by the girl’s parents to give gifts to the baby, in-laws and the mother), and the “chhatthi” (gifts from the in-laws for the baby and the mother). These customs, although evolving over time, continue to shape how Memon women exercise their reproductive agency, often within the boundaries of familial expectations.

P1 adhered to many traditional Memoni customs, including the 40-day postpartum stay at her maternal home after the birth of both her children. When asked about this tradition, she responded, “*Yes, after both the kids.*” This automatic acceptance of the tradition indicates the deep-rooted nature of these customs in her life. Furthermore, when it came to the expenses of the first pregnancy, her parents paid for everything, which she explained as something obvious and unquestioned: “*It happens. If it happens, we have to do it.*” P1’s lack of conversation with her husband or in-laws regarding this expense further reflects how these traditions dictate certain actions, leaving little room for negotiation in this area. However, when discussing the aana event, P1 noted that it didn’t fully happen according to custom: “*There was no dinner... only refreshments were served and then I came home.*” This departure from tradition suggests that while customs are still influential, there are subtle shifts happening within families, and P1 accepted these changes without resistance.

P2 provided a more modern perspective on these traditions. She stayed at her maternal home for more than 40 days after her delivery due to her husband’s absence, and this extended stay was accepted without issue. However, P2’s situation diverged from tradition when it came to paying for pregnancy expenses. She explained, “*In our family, it is said that the first delivery is done by the grandmother,*” but in her case, her husband paid for the expenses. P2 highlighted how these customs are shifting within her Batwa Memon community, where the in-laws now view the girl’s parents paying for the first child’s expenses as “*a matter of ego.*” This resistance to tradition demonstrates how P2 and her family exercised their agency by choosing to not follow certain expectations, negotiating a more modern approach to reproductive responsibilities.

P3 also reflected a departure from tradition when it came to the financial expectations of her first pregnancy. While her mother was keen to pay for everything, as is the custom, P3 resisted this: *“Why would you pay? Why would that happen?”* Her husband, too, refused to follow this tradition. Her questioning of the tradition and her rejection of the idea that her parents should bear the costs reflected her exercise of agency in reshaping these customs. However, she still adhered to other traditions, such as staying at her maternal home for 40 days and having both an aana and a chhatthi. This blend of adherence and resistance shows how she navigates her reproductive agency within the framework of evolving Memoni traditions.

P4 offered a contrasting view, as her experience within the Okhai Memoni community differed from some of the traditional customs followed by other Memoni groups. She explained that in her family, the 40-day postpartum stay at the maternal home is not practised: *“We are at in-laws for 40 days, and after that you can go for 1-2 weeks.”* This highlights how community-based variations within the Memon ethnicity influence the extent to which these traditions are followed. Her parents did not organise an aana event or cover the expenses of her first child, and she noted that in her family, this has never been the practice. However, her in-laws did organise an Aqeeqah event in which a chhatthi was arranged by the in-laws and her parents also brought gifts for her and the baby in that event, as is custom in Okhai Memons, reflecting adherence to customs within Okhai Memons.

P5 provided a unique perspective, as she consciously resisted the tradition of staying at her maternal home for 40 days. She explained, *“I was against it... but when the time comes, you actually need your mother.”* Despite her initial resistance, she eventually complied with the tradition, recognizing its practical benefits. However, when it came to paying for pregnancy expenses, P5 and her husband actively opposed the tradition, stating that she had her own insurance and did not want her parents or in-laws to cover the costs: *“I made it very clear that... nobody else should be paying for it.”* This decision reflected P5’s agency in redefining the traditional financial obligations surrounding childbirth. She still organised a small-scale aana event, showing how these traditions are sometimes followed more as a symbolic gesture than as a strict adherence to custom.

P6 also reflected a mix of adherence and resistance to traditional Memoni customs. After the birth of her first child, she stayed at her maternal home for 40 days, but she did not follow this tradition after her second child due to her parents shifting to another house: *“It was already very chaotic.”* This decision to forgo the tradition demonstrated her agency in prioritising practicality over custom. However, she did follow other traditions, such as having an aana event organised by her parents and a chhatthi arranged by her in-laws, where she received gifts, including gold. Her narrative shows how these customs remain important markers of family and social ties, but she exercised flexibility in how strictly they are followed.

P7 also highlighted the evolving nature of Memoni reproductive traditions, particularly when the couple is a hybrid of Memoni communities. She belonged to Okhai Memons from her father’s side while her husband is a Jetpur Memon which meant that she and her husband tried to respect the customs of each other’s communities. While the tradition of maternal grandparents paying for the expenses of the first child is still prevalent in Jetpur Memons, her father-in-law paid for all the expenses, diverging from the expectation that her parents would cover the costs. His decision to cover the expenses indicated that certain patriarchal norms within the family structure can override traditional practices. She also followed the 40-day stay at her maternal home, combining this with the custom of her parents by spending the first six days at her in-laws’ in which an Aqeeqah event was organised so her parents could bring gifts for her, the baby and her in-laws. Her ability to blend these traditions, while also adapting to her personal and familial circumstances, reflects her reproductive agency in navigating these customs. Thus, it was revealed how Memoni reproductive traditions continue to shape women’s reproductive agency, though often in evolving and flexible ways. By choosing how and when to follow these customs, these women assert their autonomy, negotiating between tradition and modernity in their reproductive lives.

06b: Child-Rearing in Memoni Households

In Memoni households, child-rearing practices involve both the nuclear family and extended family members, creating a dynamic space where women must exercise their reproductive agency. P1 exercised her reproductive agency directly by establishing clear boundaries around the roles of family members in the upbringing of her children. While she appreciates the support from her parents and in-laws for tasks like feeding or taking care of the children when she is unavailable, she asserted, *“Nobody has the right to say or teach them their moral values and ethics... that’s for mom and dad only.”* This showed how she maintains control over the more significant aspects of parenting, ensuring that only she and her husband decide on matters of values and discipline. This assertion of agency in a traditionally communal setting reflects how Memoni women navigate the involvement of extended family while retaining authority over the core aspects of child-rearing. She also emphasised that when it comes to parenting from her husband’s side, she is the one to offer him options for decision-making as she knows more, being a mother. This signifies how she has internalised the traditional gender roles of mother and father and deems it a personal responsibility to *“involve”* her husband in child-rearing while it should be equally his responsibility. Nonetheless, by actively involving her husband in matters related to the children, she does exercise agency in challenging the traditional role of a father, albeit subconsciously.

P2 reflected a more collaborative approach, where the extended family’s involvement is seen as beneficial, but not without limits. She described her husband’s significant role in raising their child but made it clear that while her in-laws and parents are involved, they do not have the final say in major parenting decisions. For instance, when it came to cutting her child’s hair, she stated, *“My mother and mother-in-law both told me to cut her hair again... I told them no.”* This moment showed her ability to assert her preferences despite differing opinions from family members. Her statement that *“she’s not just mine, she’s everyone’s”* revealed her willingness to share some aspects of childrearing, but her ability to override decisions she disagreed with demonstrates her control in areas that matter most to her. She also expressed that fathers are becoming more active in matters of child-rearing with time, mentioning: *“I feel that now fathers look after their kids a lot and help a lot,”* indirectly reinforcing the patriarchal notion that husbands ‘help’ their spouses in child-rearing.

P3 provided a nuanced view, where her reproductive agency is exercised subtly within a setting where unsolicited advice is frequently given by family members. She acknowledged that her husband is deeply involved in their child's upbringing, but she is clear about rejecting external influences when necessary. For example, she humorously recounted a situation during her pregnancy where her husband, influenced by his mother, tried to prolong the pregnancy: *"I was like, who was even asking you? I am deciding, it's my body, sit quietly."* This moment captured her determination to assert control over key decisions, both during pregnancy and later in child-rearing. While her in-laws are occasionally involved in helping with the baby, she made it clear that decisions about her child's upbringing are ultimately hers and her husband's. She mentioned that she is willing to involve her mother-in-law when offered help but avoids asking for it herself, indicating her desire to maintain some independence in raising her child.

In contrast, P4 desires for greater agency in maintaining boundaries with regard to her child's discipline and upbringing. She expressed frustration that her in-laws tend to spoil her daughter, often undermining her attempts to discipline. She explained, *"If I want to raise my child in a certain way, then she (mother-in-law) should let me."* While she appreciated her mother-in-law's involvement in caring for her daughter, she expressed her wish for greater respect for her parenting decisions. Her husband's involvement in parenting is also shaped by traditional gender roles where he works late and only spends as much time with their daughter as is available.

P5 reflected a more balanced and controlled form of agency, where she and her husband set clear rules regarding the upbringing of their child, which are respected by both sets of grandparents. This demonstrates her effective negotiation of familial involvement, where she allows help but retains ultimate control over important decisions regarding her child. She also shared that her husband is equally involved in parenting, to the extent where *"if a third person sees us, that person would consider him as the mom as well. So he's like a hands-on dad."* Her statement, *"I am okay with their involvement as it is now,"* shows her satisfaction with how she exercises agency in balancing shared caregiving responsibilities. P6 expressed dissatisfaction with the level of involvement from her family and in-laws, particularly about discipline. She critiqued how her family pampers her children, making it harder for her to set boundaries: *"If they see my child crying and I'm not giving attention, they will start to pay attention."* Her frustrations

highlighted how familial interference can undermine her authority, yet she continues to assert her preferences, advocating for less involvement to create space for her to discipline her children according to her own values. By communicating her discontent and setting limits, P6 exercises reproductive agency, even in a challenging environment where extended family members are highly involved.

P7 illustrated a more cooperative dynamic, where her husband and in-laws are involved in child-rearing, but she and her husband maintain control over key decisions. She noted that her husband is involved, stating, “*He is 40-60, maybe 30-70,*” and that decisions regarding schooling are taken together. Like other participants, her husband’s involvement is also informed by traditional gender roles. She also acknowledged the role of her mother-in-law in daily caregiving, such as feeding her child, but asserted that both she and her husband make the ultimate decisions. Her control over major decisions related to her child showcases how she navigates familial expectations while exercising her reproductive agency. These women demonstrated various ways in which they navigate child-rearing responsibilities in Memoni households, often balancing the communal involvement of their extended families with their own preferences and values. Whether through subtle resistance or explicit boundaries, these women exercise control over how their children are raised, reflecting a blend of traditional expectations and personal autonomy.

06c: Motherhood as Institution or Experience?

Adrienne Rich’s theory of institutional motherhood (1976), which distinguishes between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and personal experience of mothering, provides a lens to analyse the participants’ responses. Rich (1976) argues that the institution of motherhood confines women to domestic roles, demanding self-sacrifice and unwavering responsibility, which in turn reinforces and extends patriarchal control. The participants’ narratives reflected this tension between the institution and the lived experience of motherhood. For instance, P1 described motherhood as a beautiful journey but noted that society places immense pressure on mothers, blaming them for any issues their children face, such as illness or improper care. “*Mom is blamed for every single thing,*” she observed, but added that “*if you are satisfied from inside,*”

a mother should ignore societal judgement. This aligns with Rich's (1976) notion of societal control, where the mother is expected to serve patriarchal ideals of perfection, yet P1 resists this by emphasising personal satisfaction over external validation. P2 also reflected on the sacrifices involved in motherhood, acknowledging how it compromises personal time and relationships, particularly with her husband. She illustrated the loss of autonomy that comes with motherhood, a key point in Rich's theory of motherhood (1976) as a structure of labour designed to serve others. Her account of societal expectations reinforces the pressure to be the ideal mother, showing how the institution shapes women's experiences and limits their freedom.

P3 challenged the traditional narrative more directly, suggesting that motherhood is not essential for all women and that "*you can choose other wives,*" implying that fulfilment can be found outside of the institution. She also discussed the emotional toll of motherhood, describing it as a "*toxic relationship*" at times, where societal expectations of perfection amplify the strain. This perspective highlights how the institutional definition of motherhood—dictated by society—can create internal conflict and emotional exhaustion, echoing Rich's critique of the oppressive nature of patriarchal motherhood (1976). Similarly, P4 spoke to the loss of individuality, stating that "*they have to kill the young girl inside them so that they can look after their baby.*" This is consistent with Rich's idea of motherhood as a form of servitude, where women are expected to sacrifice their personal identities to fulfil societal roles. Her acknowledgment that no mother can be perfect aligns with the idea that the institution of motherhood imposes unattainable standards but her awareness of these unnecessary standards also highlights her reproductive agency in challenging the institution of motherhood.

P5 further critiqued this pressure, noting that there is a "*never-ending pressure of the society on mothers,*" even in progressive families, revealing the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal norms. Despite acknowledging the practical necessity of motherhood for future companionship, she challenged the patriarchal belief that a woman's life is incomplete without children. This notion opposes the institutionalised idea of motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment for women. Both P6 and P7 emphasised the overwhelming responsibility and societal scrutiny that comes with motherhood. P6 remarked that "*society has made it hard to be a mother*" with constant criticism and unsolicited advice, while P7 noted that "*neither moms nor kids can be perfect,*" yet societal

expectations persist. These reflections embody Rich's theory of the institution of motherhood (1976), where the ideal of the perfect mother is used to control women and maintain patriarchal structures.

Rich's theory of institutional motherhood also manifests in several of the participant's experiences regarding their educational attainment where they were forced to quit their studies due to getting pregnant. This highlights how mothers are expected to forgo their individuality and personal aspirations as soon as they become a mother because then, they are expected to fulfil the role 'nature' has designated to them. The existence of institutional motherhood can also be seen in how all the participants' roles as mothers were informed by traditional gender roles which eventually served to sustain the "power of the fathers" (p. 57) aka patriarchy, as theorised by Rich, because it afforded them the freedom to live their lives as they wanted while still being in control of their wives and children. Hence, the interviewees' experiences reveal the burdens of societal expectations that enforce conformity to a rigid, patriarchal definition of motherhood, while also hinting at moments of resistance and redefinition of the role, highlighting the complex intersection of motherhood as both a personal and socially controlled experience.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research study aimed to explore the strategies employed by Memon women in exercising their reproductive agency within the ethnic landscape of the Memon community, informed by their unique reproductive traditions and customs. Utilising a qualitative approach to research, semi-structured interviews were used to gather detailed narratives of seven Memon women who belonged to various Memoni communities. The findings reveal a nuanced interplay of the traditional gendered expectations from mothers and the strategies these women employ to assert their reproductive agency, highlighting the challenges they face as they navigate motherhood in a Memoni ethnic landscape.

The findings were analysed through the lens of reproductive agency as conceptualised using the theories of both Bhatti (2014) and Kabeer (1999), Kandiyoti's classic patriarchy (1988) and Rich's institutional motherhood (1976). Since the main research question primarily focused on the strategies of reproductive agency, it was the most heavily used framework in the analysis. However, separate sections were included to present a holistic and detailed analysis, utilising the remaining frameworks which revealed that Kandiyoti's theory of classic patriarchy is only partially applicable to the Memoni family structure within Pakistan since family systems are evolving and young women are now able to exercise greater agency in and through their spousal relationships which are consciously subdued in classic patriarchy by the mother-in-law. In fact, the older generation is also changing over time as traditional gender roles become more relaxed and more freedom is extended to the family members. Nonetheless, another aspect of Kandiyoti's theory which is patriarchal bargains is clearly evident in the indirect and subtle strategies of agency that women employ within the constraints of patriarchy. On the other hand, Rich's theory of institutional motherhood can be seen as fitting since mothers are still expected to bear the primary burden of motherhood as their individual identities diminish to serve their family. Evaluating based on participants' responses and choices, institutional motherhood is still prevalent in the Memon ethnicity in Pakistan.

Furthermore, the results revealed that Memon women exercise reproductive agency through a variety of strategies, including negotiation, communication, backstairs influence, direct

resistance and strategic compromise. These strategies allow these women to navigate both personal desires and societal pressures in making reproductive decisions regarding children, contraceptives, family size, spacing, reproductive health and even, child-rearing. Negotiation is a common theme, as many respondents highlighted how they reached mutual agreements with their husbands in several domains of reproductive life such as family planning, upbringing of their children, Memoni reproductive traditions and more. This allowed them to balance their personal desires with familial and social expectations.

Communication also plays a central role in reproductive decision-making, with many women emphasising open dialogue with their husbands. Participants repeatedly asserted that they engaged in collective decision making with their husbands and in matters where they felt their agency was being restricted, they preferred to openly communicate their needs with their husbands and make them understand the importance of their personal goals. By convincing their husbands, participants demonstrated how clear communication enables women to assert their preferences while maintaining harmony within the relationship.

In more complex family dynamics, Memon women often exercise backstairs influence by leveraging their relationship with their husbands to affect broader family decisions. For instance, some participants revealed that they would often communicate her preferences to their husbands, who would then advocate for them in front of the extended family. This indirect approach allows women to navigate traditional family hierarchies while still exercising agency and ultimately achieving their desired outcomes. Direct resistance is also evident, particularly in how some women push back against societal and familial pressures regarding childbearing. Several respondents resisted the expectation to conceive immediately after marriage or to have more children than they desired and ensured that their husbands were aware of their desires by directly letting them know and clearly asserting their agency. This resistance reflects a strong sense of personal autonomy in the face of societal norms.

Strategic compromise is another key strategy employed by some of these women as they described making compromises that allowed them to maintain some degree of control while managing expectations. For example, while one participant preferred to inform her mother-in-

law before leaving the house so as to exercise agency in deciding when and where to go, another respondent compromised by delaying her education temporarily to meet family expectations but continued to pursue her academic goals later. These compromises enable women to balance personal desires with societal pressures without completely surrendering their agency.

Together, these strategies—negotiation, communication, backstairs influence, direct resistance, and strategic compromise—demonstrate how Memon women exercise reproductive agency in nuanced ways. They navigate a complex web of personal, familial, and societal expectations while employing a range of tactics that allow them to assert their autonomy and make informed decisions about their reproductive lives. By incorporating questions regarding not just the reproductive choices of these women but also their everyday decision making dynamics, the findings holistically identified markers of agency in participants' personal lives such as educational attainment, employment, active involvement in choice of spouse, freedom of mobility and access over economic resources. All of these factors served to increase a woman's subsequent control over her reproductive life and behaviours, enabling a more direct use of their reproductive agency.

Implications

The implications of this research study are far-reaching, intersecting with the fields of sociology, ethnic studies, gender studies, and social development. In sociology, it highlights how Memon women navigate the structural constraints of classic patriarchy through a range of strategies, demonstrating how social norms and familial expectations shape, but do not entirely determine, their reproductive choices. In the context of ethnic studies, the research adds depth to our understanding of how cultural traditions within the Memon community influence gender roles and reproductive agency, revealing the unique pressures and expectations placed on women in this specific ethnic group.

Within gender studies, the study contributes to discussions on reproductive rights and autonomy, illustrating how women exercise agency within patriarchal systems while also engaging in

patriarchal bargains that allow them to assert some control over their lives. Finally, in the field of social development, the research provides insights into the ways women's agency, even in constrained environments, contributes to broader discussions on empowerment and gender equality, demonstrating that strategies like negotiation, compromise, and resistance are vital in enabling women to shape their own reproductive futures. The study's findings emphasise the importance of recognizing women's voices and agency in development policies that seek to empower marginalised groups, particularly within patriarchal and ethnic structures.

Limitations

The limitations of this research, rooted in its qualitative, cross-sectional and semi-structured approach, likely influenced the depth, breadth, and generalizability of the findings. While qualitative methods provide rich and personal narratives, they inherently limit the ability to generalise the findings to broader populations. The cross-sectional design of the present research captures experiences in a snapshot, which prevents the study from examining how women's reproductive agency evolves over different life stages or in response to changing social circumstances. This research methodology also poses a potential risk of social desirability bias since the interview probed participants to answer about the intimate decisions of their reproductive life which may have led participants to answer in a socially desirable way. Some people also generally do not like to share the details of their interpersonal relationships such as the one they share with their husband and children, much less to a stranger over the internet which may have impacted the integrity of their responses.

Furthermore, the sample size was limited, with participants restricted to the age group of 18-30, which excludes older women whose experiences could reflect different cultural expectations or shifts in reproductive agency across generations. The online format of the interviews may have constrained participants from fully expressing themselves, especially on sensitive topics related to reproduction, as they may have felt less at ease compared to face-to-face interactions.

Additionally, since the sample was drawn entirely from women living in joint family systems,

the findings may disproportionately reflect the dynamics specific to such households, where patriarchal control and extended family influence can be more pronounced. This limits the applicability of the findings to women in nuclear families or alternative living arrangements, who may experience different levels of agency. These limitations suggest that while the study provides valuable insights into the strategies Memon women employ to navigate reproductive agency, a more diverse sample and longitudinal approach would be necessary to fully understand the complexities of their experiences across different contexts and life stages.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on this topic should explore a broader range of communities and ethnic contexts to examine how women exercise reproductive agency within varying patriarchal structures. Comparative studies between Memon women and women from other ethnic or religious groups could provide deeper insights into how cultural, religious, and social norms influence reproductive choices across diverse populations. Additionally, research could focus on the evolving role of education and economic empowerment in shaping reproductive decisions, particularly examining how access to education and financial independence alter women's ability to negotiate within traditional family structures. Future research could also explore reproductive agency intergenerationally to gain a valuable perspective into how traditional gender roles and the subsequent practice of agency has evolved over time. Researchers could also focus on a comparative analysis of the strategies employed by women in joint family setup as opposed to women living in nuclear families to explore the intricacies of family structures and their impact on women's agency. Finally, longitudinal studies following women's reproductive choices over time could capture how their strategies, such as negotiation or compromise, change as their social or familial circumstances evolve, offering a dynamic understanding of reproductive agency within patriarchal societies

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Appendix A: Recruitment Form

Bacha Kab Karogi? A qualitative analysis of the Reproductive Agency exercised by Memon Women

Hello,

My name is Malaika Chokshi and I am currently in my 8th semester of BSSSLA (Social Sciences and Liberal Arts) degree. I am conducting research on the reproductive behavior and decision making of Memon women as part of my Culminating Experience project which is required for the fulfillment of my degree. My research aims to find out how Memon women uniquely experience reproductive agency in different aspects of reproduction such as **contraceptive decision making** and expectations regarding **conception, family size** and **gender constitution**.

As part of my research study, I wish to conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews with eight women and will be needing volunteers from the **Memon community in Karachi** wishing to participate in my research. If you fit the following criteria, kindly fill out the form and help grow the literature surrounding reproductive empowerment of women in Pakistan.

1. Participants must be Memon women and must be married within the Memon community.
2. They must be aged between 18-30 years.
3. They must have been married for equal to or less than five years.
4. They must have at least one child.
5. They must be living with their in-laws in a joint family set-up.

If you fulfill this criteria, please sign up below with your information so that I can contact you for further details. This information will remain confidential and will only be used to contact you for the interview.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I will only be conducting **in-person interviews** so that your privacy can be maintained and I will be willing to come to whichever place you feel most comfortable having this interview at. All your information will be kept strictly confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research. You are allowed to freely withdraw from this research study at any point without any consequences.

Thank you!

malaikachokshi02@gmail.com [Switch account](#)



Not shared

* Indicates required question

Do you fulfill the complete criteria to participate in this research as listed above? *

Yes

No

Next

Clear form

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Personal Information

1. How are you doing?
2. How do you feel about the interview? (opportunity to assure them)
3. How old are you?
4. What is your last academic qualification?
Prompts: did you complete your last degree or left it to marry? Was it your decision or were you asked to?
5. What is your employment status?
Prompts: duration and nature of current job, history of employment, time spent at work
6. What does a routine day look like for you?

Familial Information

7. How old is your husband?
8. What is his last academic qualification?
9. What is his employment status?
Prompts: duration and nature of current job, history, time spent at work
10. What about your family (both parents & in-laws)?
Prompts: education level, employment status

Agency before Marriage (General)

11. Do you think there is a right/ideal age of marriage? According to you, what is the right age for marriage?
Prompts: For girls? For boys?
12. How old were you when you got married?
Prompts: Were you ready? Did you want to get married then? Would you have waited if you were given a choice?

13. How did you get married? (ask sensitively)

Prompts: Arranged/love, cousin/relative/non-relative? Was your consent sought? Who took the final decision?

14. What were your parents/guardian looking for in a groom?

Prompts: Job, money, education, family, same caste

15. What were you looking for in your husband to be?

Prompts: Job, money, education, family, any other. Did your expectations become real?

16. What do you think your husband was looking for in a bride?

17. What were your in-laws looking for in their son's wife? What about your mother-in-law?

18. What is your opinion on dowry? Do you think it is valid to ask for it?

Prompts: Did you bring dowry? Did your in-laws ask for anything or were they silent about it or was their refusal very explicit? Were they happy with it? Do you think it affected your importance in this home?

Personal Relationships & Agency after Marriage (General)

19. How would you describe your relationship with your husband?

Prompts: can you give any examples of how your husband treats you (doesn't have to be small or big but only significant for you)? Does he give you any money on a monthly or weekly basis or per expense or do you have to ask for it? If you earn, do you cover your own expenses or does he still offer to give you money or is there a silent assumption about money?

20. What would you change about your relationship with your husband to make it even better?

Prompts: More education/less education, living in a separate/joint household, having more money

21. What is your relationship like with your in-laws?

Prompts: suggestions, communication (Can you communicate openly with them? What topics do you feel like you can not talk about?)

22. What changes do you think could make your relationship with your in-laws even better?

Prompts: More education/less education, living in a separate household, having more money

23. Who is the main decision maker in your in-laws family? Who was the main decision maker in your birth family?

Prompts: Decisions taken by women only? Men only? Are you consulted? Which areas?

24. How involved are you in decision making with your husband?

Prompts: which areas? (how to spend money, where to invest, children, contraceptives, where to go (daily/holidays))

25. How do you think authority is distributed in your in-laws' family?

Prompts: what does the hierarchy look like?

26. How often do you go to your maternal home?

Prompts: Who decides? Are you and your in-laws/husband okay with this arrangement?

27. How often do you go out for a social event alone (with your friends/cousins/people not related to your husband)?

Prompts: Do you need permission? Whose? How do you go?

28. How often do you go out with your husband alone to spend quality time?

Prompts: Do you need permission? Whose? What kind of activities do you do when you go out? Who decides?

Reproductive Agency - Pregnancy & Children

29. Had you ever thought about children before getting married? Did you talk to your husband about children? How many children did you want to have when you got married?

Prompts: Boys/girls? Reasons? Have your views changed after your marriage? Reasons?

30. What is the ideal age for women to bear children?

Prompts: How long after marriage? The reasons?

31. When did you have your first child?

Prompts: Were you ready? Was there any family pressure? Your family? Your husband? Husband's family?

32. Did you have any fertility issues before conceiving? When you got pregnant, who decided which doctor? Who came with you?

33. How did you decide when to have your first born and subsequent children?

Prompts: who else was involved in this decision? What factors were considered?

34. Have you ever used contraceptives/family planning methods?

Prompts: If yes, what type? When did you start? How long did you use it? Current use?

Who decided? Is there anything you like or dislike about the method you use? Did any of you have doubts after you started using it? If no, reasons?

35. Where did you have your first child? Who decided?

Prompts: Subsequent ones? Who decided?

36. Did you go to stay at your maternal home for forty days after childbirth?

Prompts: If not, reasons?

37. Did your parents pay for all the expenses incurred during your first pregnancy?

Prompts: If yes, were you fine with this? Did your husband and in-laws ask your parents to pay? Did your parents *want* to pay? If not, whose decision was that?

38. Did you have an *aana* (explain if they don't know the word) at the end of your forty day stay?

Prompts: who was invited? Did your parents give you and your baby gifts? Did they also give gifts to your husband and in-laws? If yes, did they want to or had to? If not, did your in-laws/husband refuse to accept any gifts?

39. Did your in-laws arrange a *chatthi* (explain if they don't know the word) for you and your baby?

Prompts: did you like the gifts? Did they have an aqiqah event?

40. How involved is your husband in matters of childrearing?

Prompts: what areas?

41. In what ways are your parents and in-laws involved in the upbringing of their grandchildren? How else would you like them to be involved? Would you like their involvement to be less or more?

42. In your opinion, what is the ideal age gap between children and why is that ideal? Do your children have this age gap? Why or why not?

Prompts: if only one child - when do you think you will start planning for your next child? Would your husband and family members agree with your decision?

43. What is your opinion on motherhood? Do you think it is fulfilling or constraining? What is society's role in defining a mother's role and what are the consequences of that defined role?

Appendix C: Consent Form



CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Bacha Kab Karogi? A qualitative analysis of the Reproductive Agency exercised by Memon Women

Researcher Name: Malaika Chokshi

Ethics Reference: ERC IBA

Please tick the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without my legal rights being affected

I agree to the interview being voice recorded

I am happy to be contacted regarding other research projects. I therefore consent to the University retaining my personal details on a database, kept separately from the research data detailed above. The 'validity' of my consent is conditional upon the University complying with the Data Protection Act and I understand that I can request my details be removed from this database at any time.



Data Protection

I understand that information collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on a password protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purpose of this study. All files containing any personal data will be made anonymous.

Name of participant.....

Signature of participant.....

Date.....

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

Title of Research Study: *Bacha Kab Karogi? A qualitative analysis of the Reproductive Agency exercised by Memon Women*

About me: Hello. I am Malaika Chokshi, a final year psychology student at the Institute of Business Administration. I am currently conducting research on the reproductive agency of Memon women for my final year Culminating Experience thesis.

Description of the Study: This research is to explore the reproductive agency of Memon women which will focus on their reproductive decision making regarding choices in and about children and contraceptives.

If you fit the profile of the participant and give your consent, I would like to conduct a 40-60 minute interview where I would interview you about your experience navigating societal, cultural and familial expectations regarding reproduction as a married woman in the Memon community.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no risks involved with my research study. However, you may feel discomfort at my questions about contraceptive use since it is still a topic which is not openly discussed. However, please know that it is important to talk about these things because they are central to a woman's reproductive experience. Nonetheless, your comfort and ease of mind are my priority and if you wish to stop, we will stop the interview.

Confidentiality: Your confidentiality is of utmost importance. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the interview data. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity, and all data will be securely stored and only used for research purposes.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with me, the university, or any other parties involved.

Are there any benefits in my taking part? Your involvement will contribute greatly to understanding the reproductive experience and agency of women within the Memon community and will add to the growing literature about the reproductive choices and agency of women. It will also help further the cause for women's reproductive empowerment and their right to choose for themselves freely and without fear or pressure.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at m.chokshi.21901@khi.iba.edu.pk or +92 333 2123243. In the case of concern or complaint, you can contact the Institute of Business Administration- Karachi's Research Ethics Committee, rec@iba.edu.pk.

Appendix E: Demographic Information

Participant No.	Age	Type of Memon	Husband's Memon Type	Duration of Marriage	No. of Children
P1	24	Kuttiyana	Kuttiyana	5 years	2
P2	23	Bantwa	Bantwa	3 years	1
P3	22	Jetpur	Veerawal	2 years	1
P4	2	Okhai	Okhai	3 years	1
P5	30	Halari	Bombaywala	5 years	1
P6	24	Jetpur	Jetpur	5 years	2
P7	23	Okhai	Jetpur	3 years	1

Appendix F: Themes & Color Codes

Primary themes	Sub-themes
Educational Attainment & Pressure to Conform	
Gendered Division of Labour	
Consent to Marry: Superficial Yes(es)	Ideal Age vs Actual Age
‘Not Good, Not Bad’: Relationship with In-laws & Individual Agency	Classic Patriarchy Still In Action?
Spousal Relationship: Love or Agency?	Who Decides What: Decision Making as a Couple Is Money a Symbol of Power?
Reproductive Agency: an Insight into Memons	Memoni Reproductive Traditions Childrearing in Memoni Households Motherhood as Institution or Experience?