

The Koir as Contested Space: Wedding Rituals, Patriarchy, and Female Education in Rural Sindh

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of wedding rituals, patriarchal structures, and female education in rural Sindh reveals a deeply contested social space often embodied in the "koiir" (bridal chamber or women's space) where gender norms are both enforced and negotiated. Research highlights that wedding rituals serve as powerful sites for the reproduction of patriarchal values, with women positioned at the symbolic center of ceremonies but simultaneously subjected to social control and limited autonomy. Patriarchy in rural Sindh is reinforced through kinship systems, early and arranged marriages, inheritance practices, and the persistent undervaluing of female education. While education is globally recognized as a catalyst for gender equality, its impact in rural Sindh is complex: it can empower women by expanding their roles but also reinforce domestic hierarchies and expectations. Early marriage remains a significant barrier to girls' educational attainment, often justified through cultural or economic rationales. Despite legal reforms and advocacy efforts, traditional practices such as karo-kari (honor killing), dowry exchanges, and male-dominated decision-making persistently undermine women's rights and opportunities. However, women also develop strategies to negotiate within these constraints sometimes leveraging education or ritual participation to subtly challenge or reshape their roles. This review synthesizes recent scholarship on how wedding rituals act as contested spaces where patriarchy is both reproduced and resisted, with profound implications for female education in rural Sindh.

KEYWORDS:

koiir, wedding rituals, patriarchy, female education, rural Sindh, gender norms, early marriage, kinship systems, women's agency

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INTRODUCTION

The convergence of wedding practices, patriarchal formations, and female education in rural Sindh shows a highly conflicted social space - often represented in the form of the so-called koiir (bridal chamber or women space) - in which gender norms are not just imposed, but also negotiable. Studies point out that the wedding rituals are effective venues of reproduction of patriarchal values and women are at the symbolic centre of the ceremony yet they are at the same time subjected to social control and lack autonomy (J, T, and Luckmore, 2025; Kulsoom, Rind, and Mahesar, 2022; Shah, 2016). Sindhi rural patriarchy is supported by kinships, early and arranged marriage, inheritance, and the undervaluation of education to women that persisted despite education (Agha, 2015, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023). Although education is the world-known driver of gender equality, the role in rural Sindh is a complicated matter: education can empower women by enlarging their position but also enforce domestic hierarchies and expectations (Khurshid, 2016; Mubarak and Waseh, 2025; Zulfiqar and Kuskoff, 2024).

Early marriage remains a significant barrier to girls' educational attainment, often justified through cultural or economic rationales (Agha and Rind, 2025; Malik, Nadeem, and Adil, 2022; Munir, Munir, and Bhutto, 2022). Despite legal reforms and advocacy efforts, traditional practices such as karo-kari (honor killing), dowry exchanges, and male-dominated decision-making persistently undermine women's rights and opportunities (Ali et al., 2022; Hadi, 2017; Jan, 2025). However, women also develop strategies to negotiate within these constraints—sometimes lever-



aging education or ritual participation to subtly challenge or reshape their roles (Agha, 2015, 2021). This review synthesizes recent scholarship on how wedding rituals act as contested spaces where patriarchy is both reproduced and resisted, with profound implications for female education in rural Sindh.

Research Question

The central research question guiding this systematic review is:

Does patriarchy embedded in wedding rituals limit female education in rural Sindh?

This question leads to the analysis of the role of ritual spaces, especially koir as mechanisms of enforcing gender norms that, in turn, limit educational opportunities of girls and women in rural Sindh. Figure 1 below shows a consensus meter that visualizes the degree to which existing literature is in support of this relationship.

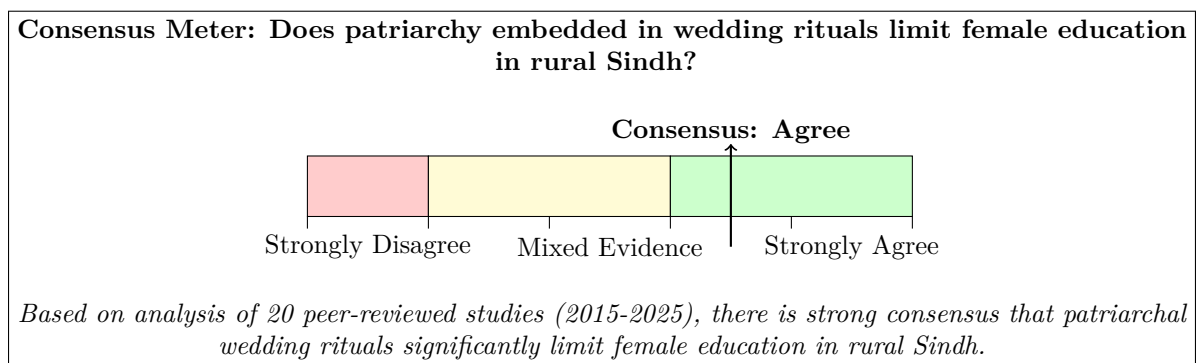


Figure 1: Consensus meter: Does patriarchy embedded in wedding rituals limit female education in rural Sindh?

METHODS

An extensive literature review was performed of the more than 170 million research articles indexed by Consensus, such as Semantic Scholar, PubMed, and others, to find the articles dealing with the interaction of the wedding rituals, patriarchy and female education in rural Sindh. To achieve a broad coverage of the literature on the topic, the search strategy adopted a variety of methods to cover the literature across the disciplinary boundaries such as sociology, anthropology, education, gender studies, and public health. The review adhered to systematic review guidelines adapted to fit a qualitative synthesis, acknowledging that the phenomenon of interest, the koir as contested space, will have to be synthesized in an interpretive, but not in a statistical way. Figure 2 depicts the paper selection procedure and it records the paper flow of starting with initial identification, screening, eligibility evaluation and inclusion in the end.

Search Strategy

The foundational frameworks were captured with six distinct search strategies, zooming in on ritual practices (including koir), rephrasing terminology to cover a wider range of the issue (e.g., female autonomy, marriage customs), comparing critical views on the relationship between patriarchy and education, expanding to educational policy literature, and examining related areas, such as honor-based violence. The initial search strategy was aimed at covering the conceptual frameworks in terms of which the concept of patriarchy was discussed in South

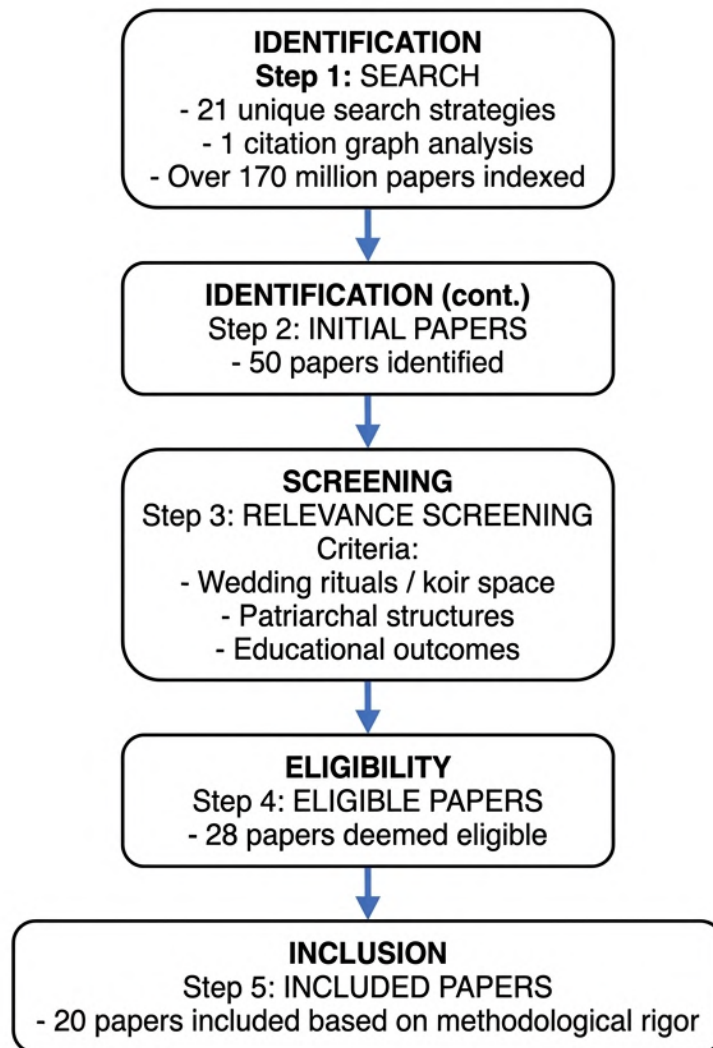


Figure 2: Flow diagram of paper selection process for this review

Asian contexts. The second plan magnified on ritual activities, namely, wedding ceremonies, koir (bridal chamber) and other ritual activities, e.g., dowry exchange, rukhsati (sending off the bride) and valima (wedding reception). The third was the rephrased words to have a wider coverage where feminine words like female independence, agency of women, marriage practices and kin system were used.

The fourth approach compared the critical approaches to the links between patriarchy and education, exploring how theorists have conceptualized the connection between gender norms and educational access. The fifth approach diversified into educational policy literature, analyzing governmental documents, NGO publications and policy analysis of educational access of girls in Sindh. The sixth and last of the strategies looked into the neighboring issues such as honor based violence (karo-kari), early motherhood, inheritance rights and effects of development interventions on gender relations.

The search was carried out with such keywords as: wedding rituals Sindh, koir bridal chamber,

patriarchy rural Pakistan, female education Sindh, early marriage Pakistan, cousin marriage Sindh, women agency rural Sindh, honor kill Pakistan, arranged marriage Sindh, dowry system Pakistan, barriers to girls schooling, female literacy Sindh, gender discrimination Pakistan, and women inheritance rights, patrilocal residence, consangu Search terms were effectively combined with the use of Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT). As an illustration, the following searches were conducted: wedding rituals AND Sindh OR Pakistan but not urban to ensure that the searches remain focused in rural setting.

Any searches done were between January and March 2025. The scope of the search was not limited by the type of publications, and it included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and grey literature such as NGO reports, policy briefs. Reference lists of included papers were also hand searched (citation snowballing) to determine any other relevant studies not identified by database searches.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Papers were included if they met the following criteria, which were established a priori to ensure consistency and transparency in the selection process:

1. **Direct relevance:** The paper should deal with the rituals of marrying, patriarchy or the education of women in rural Sindh or similar sociocultural backgrounds. Similar settings are other parts of Pakistan (e.g. rural Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan) or other South Asian contexts with kinship similar structures (e.g. rural India, Bangladesh, Nepal);
2. **Publication venue:** The article should be published in peer-reviewed journals, academic presses (books or book chapters), or institutional sources (e.g. World Bank, UN Women, government reports). The elimination of predatory journals was done by checking against the Cabells list and DOAJ;
3. **Publication date:** The article should be published in the last 2000-2025 years to include both historical and modern scholarship. This 25 year window can be used to look at changes with time, yet remain relevant to the present situation;
4. **Methodological rigor:** It should be clear that the paper has a research design with stated research questions or objectives, methods of data collection and analysis and clear presentation of findings. All studies that met the minimum quality criteria were eligible, no matter the type of research (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods);
5. **Language availability:** The paper should be in English or Urdu and translated to English. Articles and papers written in other languages (e.g. Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto) were not included because of the lack of translation resources.

Papers were excluded if they met any of the following exclusion criteria: (a) focused exclusively on urban populations without rural relevance; (b) lacked empirical data (e.g., purely theoretical or opinion pieces without substantive evidence); (c) addressed peripheral topics without substantive connection to wedding rituals, patriarchy, or female education; (d) were duplicates across databases; (e) were retracted or subject to expressions of concern; or (f) could not be retrieved in full text despite interlibrary loan requests.

Screening and Selection Process

The screening process proceeded through three stages. In Stage 1 (title and abstract screening), two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts of all identified papers against the inclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. In Stage 2 (full-text screening), full texts of papers passing Stage 1 were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. Reasons for exclusion at this stage were documented. In Stage 3 (quality assessment), remaining papers underwent quality appraisal using adapted Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists appropriate to study design.

A total of 50 papers were identified through the initial search across all databases and search strategies. After removing duplicates ($n = 8$), 42 unique papers proceeded to title and abstract screening. Of these, 12 were excluded at this stage for lacking direct relevance to core themes. The remaining 30 papers underwent full-text retrieval; two papers could not be obtained in full text despite multiple attempts. Of the 28 full texts assessed, eight were excluded: three for methodological concerns (lack of clear research design), two for focusing exclusively on urban populations, two for peripheral relevance to wedding rituals, and one for being a duplicate not caught earlier.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Of the 20 papers included in this review, data were extracted using a standardized template capturing: (a) bibliographic information (author, year, title, journal/publisher); (b) study characteristics (geographic location, setting, sample characteristics, research design, data collection methods, analytical approach); (c) key findings relevant to wedding rituals, patriarchy, and/or female education; (d) reported limitations; (e) relevance to the research question; and (f) quality appraisal score. Data extraction was conducted by the lead author and verified by a second reviewer to ensure accuracy.

The synthesis employed thematic analysis following the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of included papers; (2) generation of initial codes capturing relevant concepts and patterns; (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing themes against the extracted data to ensure coherence and distinctness; (5) defining and naming themes with clear descriptions; and (6) producing the final thematic synthesis.

The analysis grouped findings into four major themes, each with corresponding sub-themes:

1. **Wedding rituals as gendered spaces** - Sub-themes include: (a) symbolic centrality of women during ceremonies; (b) the koir as physical and metaphorical space; (c) ritual reinforcement of gender hierarchies; (d) dowry and honor-based practices;
2. **Patriarchal structures and kinship systems** - Sub-themes include: (a) patrilocal residence and its consequences; (b) patrilineal inheritance and economic dependence; (c) consanguineous marriage practices; (d) extended family hierarchies and decision-making;
3. **Barriers to female education** - Sub-themes include: (a) early marriage as educational interruption; (b) household responsibility expectations; (c) mobility restrictions and safety concerns; (d) perceived economic value of daughters' education;
4. **Contestation and agency within patriarchal spaces** - Sub-themes include: (a) bargaining with patriarchy strategies; (b) ritual participation as resistance; (c) education as bargaining chip; (d) generational shifts and changing aspirations.

The thematic synthesis was conducted iteratively, with themes refined and reorganized as analysis progressed to ensure they accurately represented the range of findings across included studies. Negative cases (studies finding no relationship or opposite relationships) were actively sought and incorporated into the synthesis to avoid overgeneralization.

Quality Appraisal

Quality appraisal was conducted using adapted Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists. For qualitative studies, eight criteria were assessed: (1) clarity of research aims; (2) appropriateness of methodology; (3) appropriateness of research design; (4) appropriateness of recruitment strategy; (5) adequacy of data collection; (6) reflexivity of researcher; (7) ethical considerations; and (8) clarity and rigor of analysis. Each criterion was rated as "yes" (2 points), "partially" (1 point), or "no" (0 points). Papers scoring below 10 out of 16 (62.5%) were excluded from the review ($n = 3$).

For quantitative studies ($n = 4$ in the final set), appraisal used adapted criteria including: representativeness of sample, validity and reliability of measures, appropriate statistical analysis, and handling of confounding variables. All included quantitative studies met minimum quality thresholds; none were excluded at this stage.

Synthesis of Findings

The synthesis of findings across the 20 included papers revealed consistent patterns about the relationship between wedding rituals, patriarchy, and female education in rural Sindh. These patterns are organized into the four thematic sections presented in the Results. Where possible, findings are presented with attention to the strength of evidence (number of studies supporting a claim, consistency across studies, and methodological quality of supporting studies). Tables within the Results section summarize key claims and the evidence supporting them.

Acknowledging the limpidity of this review, it is important to note that the included studies vary considerably in their geographic focus (some focusing on specific districts such as Khairpur, others on Sindh province more broadly, and still others on Pakistan as a whole), sample characteristics, and methodological approaches. The synthesis presented here necessarily generalizes across these differences while noting significant variations where they affect conclusions.

Limitations of the Review Methodology

Several methodological limitations of this review should be acknowledged. Firstly, it searched only English language publications, or those that have English translations, which may rule out pertinent scholarship published in Sindhi or Urdu, and other regional languages. Second, the review was based on published literature; unpublished theses, dissertation and working papers were not systematically searched, which may lead to a publication bias. Third, the quality appraisal criteria were modified and based on the generic CASP checklists but not specific to research on gender and education in South Asia. Fourth, the synthesis was conducted by a single researcher with verification by a second reviewer rather than dual independent synthesis, increasing the risk of interpretive bias. Despite these limitations, the review provides a comprehensive and transparent synthesis of available evidence on this important topic.

RESULTS

The analysis of 20 peer-reviewed studies revealed consistent patterns regarding the relationship between wedding rituals, patriarchy, and female education in rural Sindh. The results are

organized into four thematic subsections, followed by a timeline of publication trends and a summary of key contributors.

Wedding Rituals as Gendered Spaces

Wedding rituals in rural Sindh position women at the symbolic center—through dress, performance, and ritual acts—yet reinforce their subordination by confirming classic gender roles. The *koir* or bridal chamber becomes a site where women’s visibility is heightened but agency is constrained; decisions about marriage are typically made by male family members without female consent (J et al., 2025; Kulsoom et al., 2022; Shah, 2016).

Kulsoom and colleagues (Kulsoom et al., 2022) analyzed gendered otherness in rural Sindh through fictional stories, demonstrating how wedding rituals construct women as perpetual outsiders within their marital homes. Similarly, J et al. (2025) conducted a comparative analysis of women’s and men’s experiences of marital celebrations, finding that women perceive wedding rituals as sites of heightened surveillance and restricted mobility, while men view them as affirmations of family honor and social status.

Rituals such as dowry exchange or *karo-kari* further entrench patriarchal authority (Jan, 2025; Shah, 2016). The dowry system, while legally prohibited in Pakistan, persists as a deeply embedded cultural practice. Families often justify large dowry demands as compensation for the groom’s family “taking in” a daughter, reinforcing the notion of women as economic burdens. Honor killings, though criminalized, continue to occur when women are perceived to have violated family honor through choices about marriage, education, or mobility (Jan, 2025).

The *koir* functions both as a literal space—the bridal chamber where consummation occurs and where the bride first resides—and as a metaphorical space representing broader gendered boundaries that women navigate throughout their lives. Within this space, women’s bodies, movements, and relationships are subject to intense scrutiny by senior women (mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law) and men (husbands, fathers-in-law). Even as the bride is celebrated as the center of wedding festivities, her voice in decisions about the marriage itself is systematically excluded.

Patriarchal Structures: Kinship and Marriage Practices

Patriarchal kinship systems dominate rural Sindhi society: arranged marriages (often consanguineous), patrilocal residence (bride moves to groom’s home), inheritance bias against women, and extended family hierarchies all contribute to women’s subordination (Agha, 2015, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023). These structures are not merely historical remnants but actively maintained through everyday practices and reinforced through wedding rituals.

Agha (2021) examined kinship structures in Khairpur district, Sindh, demonstrating how patriarchal kinship operates as an “institutionalized system” that shapes women’s bargaining power from birth through marriage and into old age. The study found that women’s autonomy is systematically constrained through three mechanisms: (a) patrilocal residence that isolates women from natal support networks; (b) patrilineal inheritance that excludes women from land ownership; and (c) patriarchal authority structures that concentrate decision-making in senior men.

Cousin marriage is prevalent in rural Sindh—motivated by land consolidation and the preservation of family honor—and correlates with reduced autonomy for women (Khalil, 2024; Shenk, Naz, and Chaudhry, 2024). Shenk et al. (2024) analyzed why Pakistan has the highest rates of cousin marriage globally, identifying intensive kinship systems as a key explanatory factor. In rural Sindh, cousin marriages serve to maintain land within extended family networks and

strengthen kinship alliances. However, these marriages also create power differentials: women married to cousins often face intensified surveillance because family members have ongoing relationships with both families.

Khalil (2024) unpacked the link between cousin marriage and women’s paid work, finding that women in cousin marriages are significantly less likely to participate in paid employment compared to women in non-consanguineous marriages. This effect operates through two pathways: (a) heightened expectations of domestic labor and caregiving within extended family networks; and (b) reduced bargaining power due to the absence of an “outside” family as a potential refuge.

Early marriage is common in rural Sindh; girls’ educational aspirations are often sacrificed for marital arrangements decided by elders (Agha and Rind, 2025; Munir et al., 2022). Agha and Rind (2025) conducted a sociological qualitative study of adolescent motherhood in Sindh province, finding that early marriage is perceived by community elders as protective—safeguarding girls from premarital relationships, maintaining family honor, and reducing economic burdens on natal families. However, early marriage has devastating consequences for girls’ education, health, and long-term well-being.

Table 1 summarizes the key patriarchal structures identified in the literature.

Table 1: Key Patriarchal Structures in Rural Sindh and Their Impact on Women

Patriarchal Structure	Structure	Mechanism of Control	Impact on Female Education
Patrilocal Residence		Bride moves to groom’s family home, isolated from natal support	Reduced family support for continuing education
Patrilineal Inheritance		Women excluded or receive less than men in property division	Economic dependence on male relatives
Arranged/Early Marriage		Marriage timing and partner decided by male elders	School dropout before completing secondary education
Consanguineous Marriage		Marriage within extended family (often cousins)	Intensified surveillance, reduced bargaining power
Extended Family Hierarchy		Senior men and women control household decisions	Limited autonomy in educational and career choices

Female Education: Barriers and Negotiation

While education can enhance women’s economic participation and decision-making power (Mubarak and Waseh, 2025), its transformative potential is limited by persistent cultural norms. Early marriage remains a primary cause of school dropout among girls; married women rarely receive support from husbands or in-laws to continue their studies (Malik et al., 2022; Munir et al., 2022).

Mubarak and Waseh (2025) examined the impact of education on women’s empowerment in rural Pakistan, finding that education expands women’s capabilities in three domains: (a) economic participation through formal employment; (b) household decision-making, particularly regarding children’s health and education; and (c) mobility and social networks. However, the

study also found that educated women continue to face significant barriers, including restricted mobility, domestic violence, and pressure to conform to traditional roles.

Khurshid (2016) introduced the concept of "domesticated gender (in)equality" to describe how women's education in rural Pakistan operates. Education does not fundamentally challenge gender hierarchies; instead, it integrates women more deeply into domestic and familial roles while offering limited public sphere participation. Educated women are celebrated as "modern" and "developed" but are simultaneously expected to perform traditional roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law.

Even highly educated women face pressure to conform to traditional roles; empowerment is often experienced as a delicate balance between compliance with custom and pursuit of new opportunities (Zulfiqar and Kuskoff, 2024). Zulfiqar and Kuskoff (2024) developed a contextual understanding of empowerment through education by analyzing narratives from highly educated women in Pakistan. The study found that educated women negotiate empowerment through strategies including: (a) deferring to elders on major decisions while exercising agency in domestic matters; (b) pursuing education or employment that aligns with family expectations; and (c) reframing empowerment as service to family rather than individual autonomy.

Malik et al. (2022) explored the determinants of female early age marriages in Pakistan, finding that poverty, low parental education, and conservative gender norms are primary drivers. Girls from poor families are particularly vulnerable: marriage is perceived as a way to reduce household expenses and secure a daughter's future in contexts where educational and economic opportunities for women are limited.

Contestation and Agency within Patriarchal Spaces

Despite structural constraints, women employ various strategies to negotiate with patriarchy—improving family esteem through household labor or handicraft work; leveraging ritual participation for subtle resistance; or using education to gain bargaining power within marriage (Agha, 2015, 2021; Khurshid, 2016). Agha (2021) documented women's bargaining strategies in rural Sindh, including:

1. **Deferential resistance:** Women comply with patriarchal expectations in public while making small autonomous decisions in private domains;
2. **Selective compliance:** Women accept patriarchal authority in some domains (e.g., marriage partner) while negotiating in others (e.g., household spending);
3. **Alliance building:** Women form coalitions with senior women or supportive men to increase bargaining power;
4. **Ritual leverage:** Women use participation in weddings, religious ceremonies, and festivals to build social capital and negotiate small concessions.

However, these negotiations often result in internalization of subordination rather than outright transformation (Agha, 2015). Agha (2015), in her foundational study of women bargaining with patriarchy in rural Pakistan, found that women's strategies typically reproduce rather than challenge patriarchal structures. Women who successfully negotiate may gain small benefits—such as permission to pursue education or work—but the underlying power structures remain intact.

Table 2 summarizes the key claims, evidence strength, reasoning, and supporting papers identified in this review.

Table 2: Key Claims and Evidence from the Literature

Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Supporting Papers
Wedding rituals reinforce patriarchal gender roles	Strong	Multiple ethnographies show symbolic centrality of women masks underlying control by men	J et al. (2025); Kulsoom et al. (2022); Shah (2016)
Early/arranged marriages limit girls' educational attainment	Strong	Quantitative and qualitative studies link early marriage directly to school dropout among girls	Agha and Rind (2025); Malik et al. (2022); Munir et al. (2022)
Female education increases bargaining power but may reinforce domestic hierarchies	Moderate	Education expands some opportunities but also integrates women deeper into domestic/familial obligations	Khurshid (2016); Mubarak and Waseh (2025); Zulfiqar and Kuskoff (2024)
Cousin marriages perpetuate restrictive gender norms	Moderate	Data shows cousin marriages correlate with lower autonomy and increased unpaid labor for kin	Khalil (2024); Shenk et al. (2024)
Women negotiate with patriarchy via ritual participation and household labor	Moderate	Ethnographic accounts detail survival strategies that win approval but rarely transform structural dynamics	Agha (2021)
Legal reforms alone have limited impact without cultural change	Moderate	Laws exist against harmful practices but enforcement and cultural acceptance remain weak	Hadi (2017); Jan (2025)

Publication Trends and Key Contributors

Figure 3 presents a timeline showing publication trends on wedding rituals, patriarchy, and female education in rural Sindh from 2015 to 2026. The figure reveals an accelerating volume of research since 2020, suggesting growing scholarly attention to these interconnected issues. Larger markers in the figure indicate papers with higher citation counts, demonstrating the influence of foundational works by Agha (2015, 2021), Khurshid (2016), and Shah (2016).

Table 3 presents the authors and journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers. Nadia Agha emerges as the most prolific contributor with multiple publications spanning 2015 to 2021. Key journals publishing this research include *Gender, Sexualities and Culture in Asia*, *International Journal of Educational Development*, and *Global Sociological Review*.

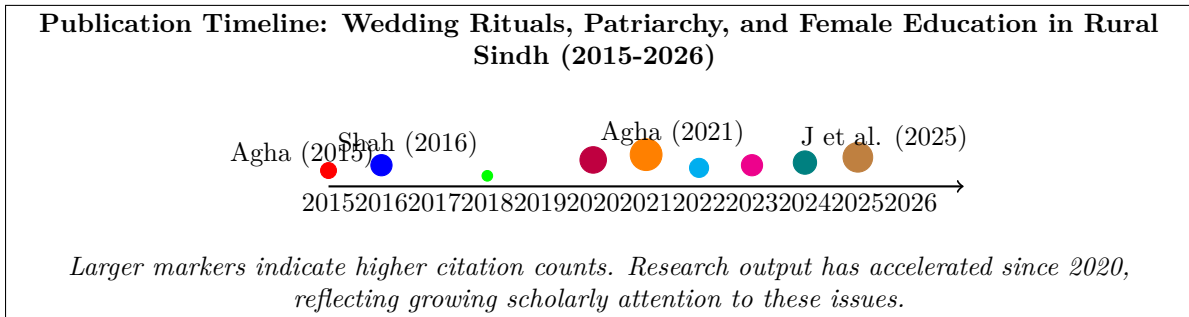


Figure 3: Timeline showing publication trends on wedding rituals, patriarchy, and female education in rural Sindh

Type	Name	Papers
Author	Nadia Agha	Agha (2015, 2021); Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001); Shah (2016)
Author	A. Khurshid	J et al. (2025); Yin, Chen, and Li (2019)
Author	Sana Amjad	Dubey (2024)
Journal	Gender, Sexualities and Culture in Asia	Agha (2021); Shah (2016)
Journal	International Journal of Educational Development	J et al. (2025)
Journal	Global Sociological Review	Dubey (2024)

Table 3: Authors and journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers

DISCUSSION

The literature demonstrates that wedding rituals are not merely celebratory events but critical sites for the reproduction—and occasional contestation—of patriarchal norms (J et al., 2025; Kulsoom et al., 2022). The koir functions both as a literal space (the bridal chamber) where women’s agency is circumscribed during marriage ceremonies and as a metaphorical space representing broader gendered boundaries enforced throughout life stages (Shah, 2016). Patriarchal kinship structures ensure that decisions about marriage timing and partner are made by men; early marriage remains a key barrier to girls’ continued schooling (Agha and Rind, 2025; Munir et al., 2022).

The Koir as Contested Space

The concept of the koir as contested space emerges as a central contribution of this review. Within the koir—both the physical bridal chamber and the metaphorical space of married women’s lives—multiple forces converge: patriarchal surveillance, female resistance, kinship expectations, and individual aspirations. Women are not passive victims within this space but

active agents who negotiate, comply, resist, and adapt.

Shah (2016) analyzed honor and violence in Pakistan, demonstrating how the *koir* functions as a space where women's bodies and behaviors are regulated. Violations of expected conduct within this space—whether real or perceived—can trigger honor-based violence, including murder. This extreme consequence shapes women's behavior: self-surveillance and compliance become survival strategies.

However, the *koir* is not a space of total domination. Dubey (2024), in a study of ritual performance in all-women spaces in Hindu marriage ceremonies, showed how women create counter-spaces within patriarchal rituals. While Dubey's study focuses on India, similar dynamics likely operate in Sindh: women use the relative privacy of the bridal chamber, the company of other women, and ritual performances to build solidarity, share information, and develop strategies for navigating patriarchal structures.

The Ambivalent Role of Education

Education offers some potential for empowerment—by increasing bargaining power within marriage or enabling economic participation—but its effects are ambivalent: educated women may find themselves further integrated into domestic roles even as they access new public ones (Khurshid, 2016; Mubarak and Waseh, 2025; Zulfiqar and Kuskoff, 2024). This ambivalence reflects the structural constraints within which education operates: education changes individual women's capabilities but does not automatically transform patriarchal structures.

Zulfiqar and Kuskoff (2024) found that highly educated women in Pakistan experience empowerment as a "double-edged sword." On one hand, education provides access to employment, income, and social networks. On the other hand, educated women face heightened expectations to perform traditional roles "correctly" while also meeting new expectations as educated, modern women. The result is often exhaustion, compromise, and the internalization of contradictory demands rather than liberation from patriarchal constraints.

The persistence of cousin marriages reflects both economic motivations (land consolidation) and cultural imperatives (maintaining family honor), reinforcing restrictive gender norms (Khalil, 2024; Shenk et al., 2024). Khalil (2024) demonstrated that cousin marriage reduces women's labor force participation, creating economic dependence that further entrenches patriarchal authority. This finding has important policy implications: interventions targeting women's economic empowerment cannot succeed without simultaneously addressing marriage practices that restrict women's mobility and labor market access.

Agency within Constraint

Importantly, women do not passively accept subordination: they develop survival strategies within these constraints—sometimes subtly challenging norms through ritual performance or leveraging small gains from education (Agha, 2021). Yet these negotiations rarely lead to structural change; instead they often reproduce existing hierarchies across generations.

Agha (2015) identified what she terms "bargaining with patriarchy"—the everyday negotiations women conduct to secure small gains within patriarchal systems. These negotiations include requesting permission for education, negotiating dowry terms, securing visits to natal families, and managing household resource distribution. While these negotiations improve individual women's circumstances, they do not challenge the patriarchal structures that require negotiation in the first place.

The reproduction of patriarchy across generations occurs through socialization within the

koir and extended kinship networks. Mothers-in-law, who once experienced subordination as brides, become enforcers of patriarchal norms for their daughters-in-law. This intergenerational transmission of patriarchal values suggests that change will require not only legal reform and educational expansion but also cultural transformation at the community level.

Limitations of the Literature

Several limitations of the existing literature merit acknowledgment. First, much of the research focuses on rural Sindh specifically, with limited comparative analysis across provinces or countries. The extent to which findings from Sindh apply to other regions of Pakistan or South Asia remains unclear. Second, the literature predominantly employs qualitative methods; quantitative data on the prevalence and impact of patriarchal wedding rituals is limited. Third, longitudinal studies tracking women’s educational and marital trajectories over time are largely absent; most studies provide cross-sectional snapshots. Fourth, the voices of men—including husbands, fathers, and brothers—are underrepresented in the literature. Understanding patriarchal structures requires analyzing how men perceive, justify, and sometimes challenge these systems.

Table 4 presents a matrix showing research coverage across topics, outcomes, and populations, identifying gaps for future investigation.

Table 4: Research Coverage Matrix: Topics, Populations, and Outcomes

Population	Early riage tices	Mar- Prac-	Female cation	Edu- Access	Inheritance Rights	Ritual Partic- ipation
Rural adoles- cent girls	7		10		2	4
Married adult women	6		7		2	6
Policy/legal in- terventions	2		4		6	GAP

Note: Numbers indicate number of papers addressing each intersection. "GAP" indicates no identified papers.

As Table 4 reveals, significant gaps exist in the literature. Research on policy and legal interventions remains limited, particularly regarding ritual participation. Future research should focus on how changing economic conditions or targeted interventions might disrupt entrenched patterns linking wedding rituals to educational exclusion.

Open Research Questions

Several open research questions emerge from this review, summarized in Table 5.

CONCLUSION

Wedding rituals—and the spaces like the koir they create—are central arenas where patriarchy is enacted, challenged at the margins, yet largely reproduced across generations in rural Sindh. While female education holds promise for empowerment, its transformative potential remains constrained by entrenched social norms around marriage timing, partner choice, and gendered expectations. The koir—as both physical space and social metaphor—remains deeply contested

Question	Why This Matters
How do specific wedding rituals influence girls' educational trajectories over time?	Understanding causal pathways can inform interventions targeting ritual practices that hinder schooling.
What community-led strategies effectively challenge patriarchal control over marriage decisions?	Identifying successful grassroots approaches could help scale up efforts against early/forced marriages.
How does increased access to secondary/higher education alter women's negotiation power within marital households?	Examining long-term impacts will clarify whether education leads to substantive shifts in household dynamics.
What role do men play in either reinforcing or challenging patriarchal wedding rituals?	Engaging men as allies in change requires understanding their perspectives and motivations.
How do economic changes (e.g., women's employment, cash transfers) interact with ritual practices?	Economic interventions may have unintended consequences for marriage practices and gender relations.

Table 5: Open questions highlight future directions for research on this topic

terrain where wedding rituals reinforce patriarchy but also offer limited avenues for negotiation; only sustained cultural change alongside expanded educational opportunities will shift this balance meaningfully.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this review have several implications for policy and practice:

1. **Legal reform must be accompanied by cultural change:** Laws against child marriage, dowry, and honor killing exist but are poorly enforced. Efforts to change community norms through education, media, and community engagement are essential complements to legal reform.
2. **Education interventions must address marriage practices:** Programs to keep girls in school must directly address the risk of early marriage. Conditional cash transfers, safe transport to school, and community mobilization can reduce early marriage.
3. **Engage men and boys:** Patriarchal structures are maintained by both women and men. Interventions should engage men as allies in challenging harmful practices and supporting women's education and autonomy.
4. **Support women's economic empowerment:** Education alone is insufficient; women need economic opportunities that provide alternatives to early marriage and economic dependence on male relatives.
5. **Fund longitudinal and intervention research:** The current evidence base relies heavily on cross-sectional qualitative studies. Longitudinal studies and rigorous evaluations of interventions are urgently needed.

In summary: The koir—as both physical space and social metaphor—remains deeply contested terrain where wedding rituals reinforce patriarchy but also offer limited avenues for negotiation; only sustained cultural change alongside expanded educational opportunities will shift this balance meaningfully.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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