

Early Marriages and Higher Education: Social Norms Limiting Women's Academic Participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A case study of District Buner

Rameen Bibi^{*1}, Prof.Dr. Fazlur Rahman²

Abstract

This study examines the barrier that limit female students access to higher education in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Employing a mixed-method design, the research combined a quantitative survey analyzing using SPSS with qualitative interviews examined through thematic analysis. Quantitative findings show societal expectations, financial constraints are the most critical barriers followed by family restriction, inadequate transport and limited access to resources and nearly half of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with local higher education quality. Thematic analysis identified six themes: Societal and cultural norms, financial constraints, transport and limited access to resources, family restrictions and gender roles, discrimination in institution and Student's recommendation. The study concludes that, although women in Buner view higher as essential for empowerment and social mobility, their aspiration are constrained by interconnected cultural economic and institutional barriers. It recommends targeted policy reforms, infrastructural upgrades and community-based awareness to promote gender equality in higher education.

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Corresponding Author*
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Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as one of the most powerful tools for personal and societal development. It enhances individual abilities and empowers individuals with necessary skills, capabilities, and capacity to participate meaningfully in social and economic life. As a fundamental human right, education contributes not only to individual well-being but also to broader social development and progress (Hussain, Ishafaq & Imran 2020). However, despite its recognized importance, access to educational opportunities remains unequal across different social and geographical contexts, particularly for women and girls of conservative communities.

Higher education, in particular, plays a pivotal role in developing human capital and contributing to social and economic progress. For women higher education is especially transformative, because it can enhance economic independence, improve quality of life, strengthen decision-making capacity and increase participation in social and community affairs (Hui & Khan, 2021). Educated women are also more likely to have greater awareness of their rights and opportunities and to contribute to the educational and social development of their

¹ (Corresponding Author) MPhil scholar at Qurtuba University, Peshawar, Lecturer, Pakistan studies GGDC Chamla Buner. rameen1239@gmail.com

² Department of Pol.Science/IR and Pakistan Studies. drfazlur@qurtuba.edu.pk

families and communities. Nevertheless, women's participation in higher education remains constrained in many parts of Pakistan. Cultural expectations, gendered social roles, restricted mobility, financial limitations, and family attitudes can create significant barriers to women's educational participation. (Yaseenzai, Ahad & Akhter, 2024).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), provides an important context for examining these gender disparities in education. The province has historically faced challenges regarding women's access to education, while Patriarchal attitudes, gendered expectations, and limited educational opportunities continue to influence women's educational attainment and participation. According to the 7th Population and Housing Census of Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the overall literacy rate in KP is 51.09% with a 27.42% percentage point gap between male and female literacy rate (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2023). This substantial gender disparity highlights the continuing challenges faced by women in accessing and completing education in the province.

Within the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Buner, one of the Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provides an important context for understanding these challenges. As predominately-rural districts, women and girls may face multiple social, cultural, and economic barriers to accessing continuing higher education. According to seventh population and Housing Census by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics Buner District has a literacy rate of 43.75% (60.61% for males and 27.40% for females (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2023). The considerable difference between male and female literacy rates reflects the persistent gender gap in education in district. For many girls, the transition from secondary education to higher education may become particularly difficult due to limited access to educational institution, restricted mobility, financial constraints, family expectations and prevailing gender norms (Ali.et.al, 2023).

Among these interconnected barriers, early marriage represents as significant social and cultural constraints on girls' educational participation. Early marriage can interrupt educational trajectories by placing young women under marital and household responsibilities, limiting their mobility, and creating additional financial and family pressures. Consequently, girls who might otherwise continue their education after secondary school may be unable to enter higher education or may continue their studies before completing their degree. In communities where early marriage is socially accepted or expected these pressures may be reinforced by broader cultural norms and expectations surrounding women's roles. Thus, educational decisions may be shaped not only by individual aspirations but also by expectations within families and communities.

The relationship between early marriage and girls' educational participation can be further understood through the perspective of Social Norms Theory. Social Norms involve shared expectations within families and communities that can influence individual decisions and behaviors. In contexts where early marriage is socially accepted or expected, girls and their families may experience pressure to conform to prevailing expectations regarding marriage and gender roles. Such expectations may encourage families to prioritize marriage and domestic responsibilities over girls' continued education. Therefore, examining early marriage from a social norms perspective helps to understand how family and community expectations may shape girls' decisions and opportunities regarding higher education.

Against this background, this study examines how early marriage limit girl's participation in higher education in District Buner, Khyber Paktunkhwa. It explores how cultural norms, family expectations, and Social pressure influence girls' ability to enter, continue, and complete higher education. The study further examines the relationship between early marriage and women's educational participation in the local context of Buner. By investigating these interconnected factors, the study seek to provide a deeper understanding of the social and cultural barriers that restrict women's access to and attainment of higher education and provide evidence that may contribute to policies and interventions aimed at expanding women's educational opportunities and promoting greater gender equality in education.

1.1. Problem Statement

Despite increasing attention to the educational consequences of early marriage in Pakistan, there remains limited empirical evidence on the social mechanisms through which early marriage constrains girls' participation in and continuation of higher education in District Buner, Khyber Paktunkhwa. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how family-level decision-making and socially shared expectations influence decisions regarding girls' marriage and education, and how these processes shape their transition to and persistence in higher education.

While existing research has documented the association between early marriage and educational discontinuation, less is known about the social and family level processes through which normative expectations and family pressures influence girls' decisions and opportunities to enter, continue, and complete higher education in Buner.

Guided by Social Norms Theory , this study investigates how perceived community expectations , family pressure, and normative beliefs surrounding early marriage influence girls' transition into and continuation of higher education in District Buner. By examining these mechanisms within a locally grounded context, the study addresses an important empirical and theoretical gap in understanding the relationship between early marriage, social norms, family decision-making and women's participation in higher education.

1.2. Research Questions

- How does early marriage affect girls' access to and persistence in higher education in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
- How do social norms and family decision-making influence girls' decisions regarding early marriage and participation in higher education?

1.3. Research Objectives

- To examine how early marriage affects girls' access to and persistence in higher education in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- To explore how social norms and family decision-making influence girls' decisions regarding early marriage and participation in higher education.

1.4. Significance of the study

This study is significant because it provides empirical evidence on how early marriage, social norms and family decision-making influence girls' participation in higher education in District

Buner. By focusing on a rural, the study provides locally grounded understanding of social, cultural and family related factors that shape girls access to and persistence in higher education. It also highlights the experiences and perspectives of female students, which are important for understanding the barriers they encounter in pursuing and continuing higher education.

The findings have practical significance for improving girls' educational opportunities in Buner and similar rural areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The findings may help identify appropriate interventions, including scholarships, safe and accessible transportation, girls-focused educational programs and community awareness initiatives. Such measures can support girls in overcoming social, cultural, economic barriers to continuing their education. The findings may also assist district and provincial policymakers, educational institutions and other relevant stakeholders in developing gender-sensitive policies and programs that address the factors contributing to girls' educational discontinuation.

Academically, the study contributes to the existing literature on early marriage, women's higher education, and gender disparities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by examining how social norms and family decision-making interact with early marriage to shape girls' educational trajectories. Guided by Social Norms Theory, the study contributes to the application of the theory in a rural Pakistani context by examining how perceived community expectations, family pressure, and normative beliefs surrounding marriage and gender roles influence girls' decisions and opportunities to enter and continue higher education.

2. Literature Review

The section reviews the existing literature on early marriage, social norms, family decision-making and women's participation in higher education. The literature is examined across global, national, and regional contexts to understand how early marriage and socially shared expectations shape girls' educational trajectories. Rather than treating early marriage as an isolated individual or family decision, the review considers it within the broader social and cultural context in which decisions about girls' marriage and education are made. The literature consistently indicates that early marriage can disrupt girls' education; however, comparatively less attention has been given to the social and family-level processes influence girls' transition into and continuation of higher education.

2.1. Global Evidence on Early Marriage and Girls' Education

Evidence from different cultural settings demonstrates a consistent association between early marriage and disruption of girls' educational trajectories.

Suyanto et al. (2023) in their study of early marriage among girls in Java, Indonesia, found that marriage at an early age restricted girl's educational opportunities and often resulted girls discontinuing their studies before completing secondary or higher education (Suytano, Hidayat, Egalita, & Masudah, 2023). Similarly, Khanam et al. (2024) reported that early marriage negatively affected women's educational attainment particularly through increased household responsibilities, early childbearing and limited support for continuing education after marriage. These findings suggest that the educational consequences of early marriage extend beyond the

marriage event itself, as married girls often acquire domestic and reproductive responsibilities that compete with the time and resources required for education.

Comparable patterns have been reported in Afghanistan and India. Chandal et al. (2024) found that early marriage frequently contributed to girls leaving education prematurely, with domestic responsibilities, early pregnancy and restrictions on mobility making continued education difficult. Across these studies, early marriage appears to influence education through several interconnected pathways, including increased domestic work, early motherhood, reduced mobility, and limited institutional or family support. Thus, the literature suggests that marriage can transform girls' social roles from students to wives and mothers, creating conditions that make educational participation and persistence increasingly difficult.

Although the studies reviewed above differ in their geographical and cultural settings, they demonstrate a common pattern: early marriage can disrupt girls' educational trajectories by introducing gendered responsibilities and restrictions. However, much of the global literature primarily documents the consequences of early marriage for continued education. This distinction is important because marriage decisions may be influenced not only by household circumstances but also by expectations concerning appropriate gender roles, family reputation and community approval. The global evidence therefore establishes the educational consequences of early marriage while also indicating the need to examine the social and family mechanisms underlying these decisions.

2.2. Early Marriage and Women's Higher Education in Pakistan

In Pakistan, early marriage intersects with traditional gender expectations, family structures, and unequal opportunities for women's education. Hussain et al. (2022) argue that women in Pakistan face considerable pressure to marry at a young age, particularly in communities where marriage is regarded as an important milestone in a women's life. Such expectations can influence families' perception of the appropriate timing of marriage and may result in girls' educational aspirations receiving lower priority. Early marriage can subsequently lead to early motherhood and increased domestic responsibilities, making continued education more difficult.

The challenges associated with early marriage can become more pronounced when married women receive limited support from their husbands and in-laws. Abdullah et al. (2024) similarly identified restricted mobility, societal pressure, and the prioritization of domestic roles as important barriers to women's education in Pakistan. Their findings further suggest that married female students may experience academic, social, and family-related challenges that negatively affect their educational performance, with rural students experiencing these barriers more acutely.

The burden of competing responsibilities is also highlighted by Hajra et al. (2025), who found that married students face substantial difficulties in managing education alongside household responsibilities. These competing demands can reduce the time and attention available for academic work and may undermine educational continuity. Pakistani studies indicate that the educational consequences of early marriage are produced through several interconnected

factors including domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, early motherhood limited spouse and familial support, and societal expectations regarding women's roles.

Despite these contributions, existing Pakistani studies tend to focus primarily on the consequences and barriers associated with early marriage rather than examining how family decision-making and socially shared expectations contribute to marriage decisions in the first place. In particular, limited attention has been given to whether families' decisions reflect their own preferences or are influenced by what they believe relatives, neighbors, and the wider community expect from them. This represents an important gap because family decisions regarding girls' marriage and education may be shaped by perceived social approval, fear of criticism, family reputation, and expectations concerning women's appropriate roles.

2.3. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pashtun Sociocultural Context

The context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is particularly important because women's educational participation is influenced by distinctive sociocultural and family structures. Research on Pashtun society indicates that traditional gender norms and expectations can shape women's access to educational and professional opportunities. Khan et al. (2021) argue that sociocultural impediments to female higher education in Pashtun society are deeply rooted in traditional norms and practices. Expectations surrounding women's roles, including marriage, domestic responsibilities, and family obligations, may restrict girls' educational and professional opportunities and subsequently affect their participation in the wider social and economic activities.

Evidence from neighboring districts further illustrates these dynamics. Azeem and Jan (2024), in their case study of District Mardan, identified early marriage as a continuing cultural practice that can compel young girls to abandon their educational pursuits. Their findings also highlight family responsibilities and gendered expectations, particularly the disproportionate assignment of domestic and caregiving responsibilities to women. Similarly, Abdullah et al. (2021) emphasized that parental perceptions of girls' education and the belief that educating girls may create an economic or social burden for families can contribute to decisions to marry girls at a young age, particularly in rural areas.

Taken together, the evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the broader Pashtun context suggest that girls' educational opportunities cannot be understood independently of family and community expectations. Decisions concerning marriage, mobility, education, and domestic responsibilities are embedded within broader understandings of appropriate gender roles and family obligations. However, the existing literature provides limited empirical insight into how these expectations operate through family decision-making and how they specifically influence girls' transition into and continuation of higher education in District Buner.

3.4. Justification or the present study

The reviewed literature establishes a clear relationship between early marriage and the disruption of girls' educational trajectories across global, Pakistani, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa context. Existing studies consistently identify domestic responsibilities, early motherhood.

Restricted mobility, limited family support, gendered expectations as important barriers to educational participation.

However three important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on the educational consequences of early marriage rather than examining the social processes through which early marriage decisions are made. Second, although cultural and gender norms are frequently identified as barriers to girls' education, relatively limited empirical attention has been given to how socially shared expectations and perceived community pressure operate through family decision-making. Third, there is limited empirical evidence from District Buner specifically examining how early marriage, social norms, and family decision making interact to influence girls' transition into and continuation of higher education.

These gaps indicate the need for a study that moves beyond asking whether early marriage affects girls' education and instead examines how and why marriage and educational decisions are shaped by family and community expectations. Social Norms Theory provides a useful theoretical lens for addressing this gap because it distinguishes individual preferences from socially shared expectations and perceived social pressure. From this perspective, families may take decisions about girls' marriage and education partly according to what they believe others in their community expect or consider socially acceptable. Where early marriage is perceived as a normal or desirable practice. Families may experience pressure to marry daughters at a young age even when girls have educational aspirations. Similarly, higher education for girls may be discouraged where continued education is perceived as inconsistent with traditional gender roles or family expectations.

Accordingly the present study focuses on District Buner to examine how early marriage affects girls' transition into and continuation of higher education and how social norms and family decision-making influence decisions concerning early marriage and educational participation. By examining these relationships together, the study seeks to contribute empirical evidence from a comparatively under-researched rural context and to extend the application of Social Norms Theory to the relationship between early marriage, family decision-making, and women's higher education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

2.5. Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined the relationship between early marriage, Social norms, and women's educational participation at the global, national and provincial levels, limited empirical research has specifically focused on District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Existing studies from Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa identify early marriage, domestic responsibilities, gender norms, restricted mobility, and limited family support as important barriers to female education. However, limited attention has been given to how these factors interact within the specific sociocultural context of Buner and influence women's access to and continuation in higher education.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature is predominantly descriptive and focuses on the educational consequences of early marriage rather than examining how family decision-making, socially shared expectations, and perceived community pressure shape

decisions concerning girls' marriage and education. There is also limited empirical evidence combining quantitative and qualitative perspectives to examine both the extent of these educational barriers and the social processes underlying them.

Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by examining how early marriage and social norms and family decision-making influence girls' access to and continuation in higher education in District Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social and family-level factors shape girls' educational trajectories. This study uniquely contributes by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to examine how social norms and early marriage interact to shape women's higher education in Buner.

2.6. Theoretical Framework: Social Norm theory

This study is guided by Social Norms theory developed by Christine Bicchieri. The theory explains that people's decisions and behavior are influenced not only by their personal preferences but also by the expectations of their families and communities. The theory is particularly relevant to this study because decisions concerning girls' marriage and education may shape by socially shared expectations and perceived social pressure. In the context of District Buner, families may believe that girls should marry at an early age, give priority to family responsibilities, and reduce or discontinue their education after marriage. Social Norms Theory therefore provides a framework for understanding how such expectations may influence family decision-making and contribute to restrictions on girls' participation in higher education.

Bicchieri identifies two important forms of expectations: empirical expectations and normative expectations. Empirical expectations refer to what people believe others commonly do. In this study, families may believe that most girls in their community marry at an early age or discontinue education after marriage. Such beliefs may make early marriage appear common and socially acceptable. Normative expectations in contrast refer to what individuals believe others expect them to do. For example, parents may believe that relatives and community members expect them to marry their daughters at an early age. Families may also anticipate criticism, social disapproval, or damage to their reputation if they do not follow these expectations. Such expectations may influence decisions concerning both early marriage and girls' education.

The theory is also relevant to gender role expectations, as women may be expected to define household work, childcare, and family responsibilities as primarily women's responsibilities. Following marriage, these expectations may reduce the time available for education and may influence whether a married woman is encouraged to continue her studies. Restrictions on mobility and limited support from husbands and in-laws may further affect educational participation. Thus, the relationship between early marriage and higher education may operate through interconnected social mechanisms, including social expectations, family responsibilities, perceived community pressure, ad support or restrictions from family members.

In the present study, the concepts derived from Social Norms Theory are operationalized through empirical expectations, normative expectations, perceived social pressure, and gender role expectations. These concepts are examined in relation to early marriage and girls' access to and continuation in higher education. The quantitative questionnaire will include items measuring respondents' perceptions of common marriage and educational practices, family and community expectations, perceived criticism or social disapproval, gendered household responsibilities, mobility restrictions, and family support for continuing education. The qualitative interviews will explore how these factors influence family decisions concerning marriage and education. Thus, the quantitative phase will identify patterns in the relationship between social norms, early marriage, and educational participation, while the qualitative phase will provide deep insights into the social processes and experiences underlying these patterns. Quantitative data will be analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques, while qualitative data will be analyzed thematically.

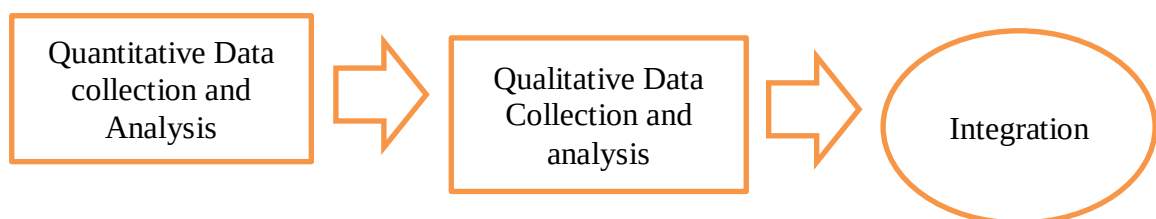
Accordingly, Social Norms Theory provides the theoretical basis for examining how socially shared expectations and perceived social pressure may influence family decision-making regarding early marriage and girls' higher education in District Buner Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The theory connects the study's key concepts with its research design by guiding the development of questionnaire items and interview questions and by providing a framework for interpreting both quantitative and qualitative findings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method to examine the relationship between early marriage, Social norms, family decision-making and women's participation in higher education. The study was conducted in two sequential phases, quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews. The quantitative phase was conducted first to identify patterns and relationships between early marriage, social norms, and educational continuation. The qualitative phase followed to provide a deeper explanation of the quantitative findings by exploring participation 'experiences and perceptions, and the social and family processes underlying the identified patterns.

Explanatory sequential design incorporated according to figure-1.



3.2. Quantitative Method

3.2.1. Population and Sample Size

The quantitative component involved a survey of 80 female participants aged 15 to 24 years. Both married and unmarried participants were included in the survey to capture perspectives from women with different experiences and perspectives regarding early marriage and higher

education. The participant includes women who had continued their higher education and those who discontinue there studies.

3.2.2. Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the study inclusion criteria and had experience relevant to the research objectives. Participants were selected from both urban and rural areas and included women with different marital and educational experiences.

Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study focused on a specific population and requires participants who can provide relevant information about early marriage, family decision-making, social norms and the higher education. It also allows the researcher to include participants with diverse experiences relevant to the research problem.

3.2.3. Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire was developed in accordance with the research objectives and Social Norms theory.

The questionnaire was used to collect information on key variables such as age at marriage where applicable, enrolment status, household income, parental attitudes toward education, family support and distance to college. The questionnaire also included items related to social norms and family decision-making, including family expectations, perceived community expectations, social pressure, gender-role expectations, and attitudes towards girls' education and marriage.

3.2.4. Quantitative Data Analysis

The Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the participants' characteristics and patterns of early marriage and educational participation.

Binary Logistic regression was used to examine the relationship between early marriage and continuation of higher education. Continuation of higher education was treated as the dependent variable, while early marriage was considered the main independent variable. Other relevant factors, including household income, parental attitudes, family support, and distance to college were considered as covariates.

The quantitative findings were subsequently used to identify patterns requiring further explanation during the qualitative phase.

3.3. Qualitative Method

3.3.1. Population and Sample Size

The qualitative phase followed the quantitative survey and included 30 participants selected through purposive sampling for semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected to provide detailed information about experiences and perception related to early marriage, social norms, family decision-making and continuation of higher education.

The sample of 30 participants was considered appropriate for qualitative phase because the purpose of this phase was to obtain in depth explanation and diverse perspective rather than statistical representation. Participants were selected according to the relevance and diversity their experiences.

3.3.2. Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the 30 participants for qualitative phase. Participants were selected based on their relevance to the research questions and the findings emerging from the quantitative phase. The qualitative sample included participants with different marital and educational experiences so that the study could explore varied perspectives concerning early marriage and educational continuation. The purposive approach enabled the researcher to obtain detailed accounts from participants with relevant experiences and perspectives.

3.3.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 30 participants. The interviews focused on family expectations, social and cultural norms, early marriage, household responsibilities, mobility, economic conditions, and support for continuing higher education.

The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across the interviews while also providing participants with an opportunity to describe their experiences and perceptions in their own words.

3.3.4. Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The researcher reviewed the interview data, developed codes, identified recurring patterns, and organized related codes into broader themes. The themes were developed in relation to the research questions and concepts of Social Norms Theory, including family expectations, perceived social pressure, gender-role expectations, domestic responsibilities, mobility, family support, and educational continuation.

Similarities and differences in participants' experiences were considered during interpretation to provide a deeper understanding of the social and family processes influencing decisions concerning early marriage and higher education.

3.4. Integration of Findings

The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during the interpretation stage using joint displays. Statistical patterns identified through survey were compared with qualitative themes and participants' narrative to explain the mechanisms underlying the quantitative findings.

For example, where the quantitative findings indicated an association between early marriages and discontinuation of higher education, the qualitative findings were used to explore how

family expectations, domestic responsibilities, mobility restrictions, early motherhood, and limited family support contribute to this pattern.

The integration allowed the study to connect statistical evidence with participants' lived experiences and provided a more nuanced understanding of how early marriage, family decision-making influence women's educational participation in higher education.

3.5. Ethics and Validity and Limitations

Ethical considerations were given particular attention due to the sensitive nature of the discussion surrounding marriage, family decision-making and women's education. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and privacy was maintained throughout the research process. Participants' identities were kept confidential throughout the research process.

The validity and trustworthiness of the findings were strengthened through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence. The inclusion of different participants groups and the use of multiple data collection methods provide diverse perspective on the research problem.

This study has some limitations. The sample was small and selected through purposive sampling; so the findings may not represent all women in District Buner. The study was conducted only in Buner, so the findings may not apply to other areas. In addition, some information was based on participants' self-reported responses, which may not always be completely accurate.

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