

Psychological Distress Among Unmarried Pakistani Women: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract

There is limited literature on the psychological distress among unmarried women in Pakistan, where the reason behind being unmarried is a concerning issue due to the country's collectivistic society, which highly regards and respects marriage, unlike living relationships that are both legally and culturally prohibited. The objective of this study is to highlight the rising cultural issue in Pakistan by investigating psychological distress, operationalized as anxiety and depression, through a cross-sectional correlational design and purposive sampling technique, with inclusion criteria of women aged at least 25 years and having a minimum of intermediate education. The study utilized the revised versions of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) to assess the variables, revealing a significant association between anxiety and depression, with regression analysis indicating a significant and positive effect of anxiety on depression among unmarried Pakistani women. The study provides comprehensive recommendations for future research and implications to address unmarried women's issues by promoting awareness, encouraging practical government steps, and emphasizing the key role of mental health professionals.

Keywords: Anxiety, Depression, Unmarried Women, Pakistan.

Introduction

Marriage is defined as a legal, consensual, and contractual relationship recognized by law, while unmarried refers to individuals who have never married, divorced, or widowed (Imam & Akhouri, 2022; Spanier, 1983). Pakistan is a male-dominated society where women are considered inferior to men and are often deprived of education, employment, and fundamental human rights, particularly in rural areas but also in general (Tabassum, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2014; Naveed & Butt, 2020). There is a cultural practice of women marrying at early ages,

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even before 18, and substantial literature has depicted the psychological distress among these married women (Shaud & Asad, 2020; Niaz, 2004).

Marital satisfaction is another critical area, with young married women in Pakistan reporting higher rates of Common Mental Disorders (CMDs) due to marital problems. Many women feel pressured to conform to marital expectations, often suppressing their dissatisfaction to avoid familial conflict (Qadir et al., 2005). Consanguineous marriages, prevalent in Pakistan, are driven by sociocultural factors rather than economic benefits, perpetuating power imbalances within families (Ghazal et al., 2022). However, there is limited literature regarding unmarried women in collectivistic societies like Pakistan, where the husband is considered the primary supporter. In Pakistan, unmarried women often face societal stigma, leading to psychological distress and low self-confidence. Widows encounter significant emotional and social challenges, including loneliness and a lack of support in decision-making and child-rearing (Zafar et al., 2023).

A descriptive study was conducted with 200 unmarried women using the Self-Confidence and Psychological Stress Scale. Findings revealed that 17% of unmarried women exhibited depressive symptoms, including low self-esteem, hopelessness, and social withdrawal. Emotional problems were most prevalent, with older unmarried women experiencing more severe psychological impacts. Employed unmarried women reported higher stress levels (Fekih & Meziane, 2016). Divorced women in Pakistan face significant psychological and social challenges, including depression—which can be defined as feeling sad most of the day, nearly every day, accompanied by negative thoughts, a lack of pleasure in daily activities, fatigue, insomnia or hypersomnia, suicidal thoughts, and hopelessness—as well as anxiety, which can be defined as a state of tension, worry, and fear of the future, alongside family pressure (Mohseni et al., 2024; Edwards et al., 2024; Hald et al., 2022). A study of 427 women in Punjab found that these factors negatively impact both divorced and married women, though divorced women experience more significant mental health burdens (Zafeer et al., 2022). Delayed marriages are also becoming more common in Pakistan, with factors such as financial constraints, dowry demands, and familial expectations contributing to this trend. These delays often increase societal pressure on unmarried women (Ghazal et al., 2022).

Globally, marriage is often associated with mental health benefits, but early or no normative marriages can have negative consequences. Married young adults report higher life satisfaction than those in other relationship statuses (Uecker et al., 2012). In Pakistan, however, the societal emphasis on marriage as a familial obligation often exacerbates mental health issues for unmarried women, highlighting the need for further research and support systems to address these challenges.

There is limited literature on the psychological distress experienced by unmarried women in Pakistan despite it being a commonly observed issue in society. This gap in the literature needs to be addressed by investigating the psychological distress among unmarried Pakistani women. Such research would provide valuable insights and implications for supporting these women and raising societal awareness to help overcome this issue. In this study, psychological distress is operationalized as depression and anxiety, which are highly prevalent among Pakistani women, according to existing literature. However, these issues have rarely been studied in the context of unmarried Pakistani women.

Hypotheses

1. There is likely a positive and significant association between anxiety and depression among unmarried Pakistani women.
2. Anxiety is likely to positively and significantly predict depression among unmarried Pakistani women.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational research design and a purposive sampling technique to collect data from unmarried women. The inclusion criteria were a minimum age of 25, Pakistani citizenship, and an educational qualification of at least intermediate. Both working and non-working women were included. Widows and divorced women were also included since they are legally unmarried until they remarry. The scales used to assess the study variables, depression and anxiety, were the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI). The BDI-II is a 21-item Likert scale (0–3) created by Aaron T. Beck (1961), with an internal consistency of 0.88. The BAI also consists of 21 items and uses a Likert scale (0–3). It demonstrates high reliability (0.92) and strong internal consistency (0.89) (Beck et al., 1988).

The study strictly followed APA 7 ethical considerations. Permission was obtained from the relevant institution before data collection. Participants were provided with an informed consent form, which stated that they could withdraw from the study at any point without facing adverse consequences. After participants signed the informed consent form, they were given demographic and study questionnaires. It was also ensured that participants did not experience any psychological or physical harm. Upon completing the questionnaires, participants were thanked for their participation. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27.

Results

Table 1: Socio demographic characteristic of participants (N=142)

Participants' Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Employment Status				
Working Women	108	76.1		
Non-working women	34	23.9		
Age			28.93	5.46
Women Marital Status				
Never Married	69	48.6		
Divorced	18	12.7		
Widows	55	38.7		

The table above shows that 108 (76.1%) of the participants are working women, while 34 (23.9%) are non-working women. The mean age of the participants is 28.93, with a standard deviation of 5.46. Most of the women are never married (69, 48.6%), followed by widows (55, 38.7%) and divorced women (18, 12.7%).

Correlational Analysis

Table 2: Correlation matrix between Study Variables (N=142)

Variables	1	2
1. Anxiety	-	.99**
2. Depression		-

Note: ** $p < .01$

The table above shows a significant positive association between anxiety and depression among unmarried Pakistani women.

Table 3: Regression Analysis (N=142)

Variable	B	SE	β	R^2	F	95% Confidence Interval	
						LL	UL
				.98	7876.50		
Constant	.07	.20				-.32	.47
Anxiety	1.02	.01	.99			.99	1.04

Note: *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$, LL= Lower Level, UL= Upper Level

The above table depicts that anxiety is positive and significant predictor of depression ($\beta = .99^{***}$, $R^2 = .98$, $F = (1, 140) = 7876.50$, *** $p < .001$) with 98% variance in depression among unmarried Pakistani women.

Discussion

There is substantial literature regarding the association of anxiety and depression among married women. However, limited studies have been conducted on the association of anxiety and depression among unmarried women, particularly in the collectivistic society of Pakistan, where societal and peer pressures are enormous. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the association of psychological distress—operationalized as anxiety and depression—among unmarried women in Pakistan, to fill the literature gap and provide implications for women in the suppressive society of Pakistan.

The first hypothesis of the study is supported, as a significant and positive association was found between anxiety and depression among unmarried Pakistani women, according to correlational analysis. The results of our study contradict findings from previous studies, which suggest that mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, are more prevalent among married women in Pakistan (Zahidie & Jamali, 2013; Qadir et al., 2013). The reason unmarried women reported a higher significant association between anxiety and depression could be attributed to the collectivistic nature of Pakistani society. Factors such as societal pressure to marry early, concerns about older women being unable to conceive, the perception of unmarried women as "unsafe," comparisons with peers who married early and seemingly achieved better lives, the cultural expectation of a husband as a primary source of support, and the stigmatization of widowed and divorced women—who face daily stereotypical discrimination—may all contribute to this association.

The second hypothesis of the study is also supported, as anxiety positively and significantly predicts depression among unmarried Pakistani women. Substantial literature supports the idea that anxiety predicts depression among women, as anxiety exacerbates feelings of hopelessness, constant worry, and low self-worth. Women with fewer coping mechanisms to deal with challenges and adverse life events often begin to experience depressive symptoms and, in extreme cases, may even commit suicide (Weiss et al., 2016; Perry et al., 2006; Zender & Olshansky, 2009). The significant effect of anxiety on depression in this context may again be linked to the collectivistic society of Pakistan, societal pressures to marry early, concerns about fertility, the perception of unmarried women as "unsafe," comparisons with married peers, the cultural expectation of a husband as a support system, and the stigmatization of widowed and divorced women.

Conclusion

The study concluded a positive and significant association between anxiety and depression among unmarried Pakistani women. Furthermore, the regression analysis depicted a significant effect of anxiety on depression among unmarried Pakistani women. The conclusion of the study highlights the psychological distress among unmarried women and emphasizes the need for proper implementation of interventions to address this psychological distress among women in

this male-dominated society. Moreover, the study provided valuable literature and encourages further research on observable issues that are rarely studied concerning Pakistani women.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cohort of unmarried women included in the study is relatively limited, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of unmarried women in Pakistan. Second, the study employs a cross-sectional correlational research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to better understand the dynamics of anxiety and depression over time. Third, there is an imbalance in the representation of unmarried women categories, such as never-married, widowed, and divorced women. Future studies should aim for a more balanced sample to capture the unique experiences of each group. Fourth, the study only included women with at least an intermediate level of education, excluding those with less formal education or no education at all. Future research should include women from diverse educational backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive understanding of psychological distress among unmarried women in Pakistan.

Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications. First, there is a need for awareness programs led by mental health professionals to address the stigmatization of never-married, divorced, and widowed women in Pakistani society. These programs should aim to foster societal acceptance of these women and reduce the pressure to marry by promoting respect for their individual choices and values. Second, it is crucial to encourage psychological intervention-seeking behaviour among unmarried women, as many are either unaware of available mental health resources or hesitant to seek help due to societal stigma. Third, the government should initiate community-based awareness programs to address the mental health challenges faced by unmarried women, providing them with the support and resources they need. Finally, media and social media platforms can play a significant role in raising awareness not only among unmarried women but also within the broader Pakistani community. Such efforts can help reduce societal pressure on women to marry and promote a culture of respect for their autonomy, identities, and legal rights.

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