



Negotiating and contextualising the meanings of the cultural norms: Ghairat and Pardah among female students at the University of Peshawar, Pakistan

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Abstract: Pashtunwali, the cultural code of Pashtuns, has been a subject of scholarly interest for decades. Despite women's potential role in Pashtun society, their perspectives, epistemes, and interpretations of Pashtunwali remain underrepresented in academic literature. The study explores this gap by understanding and interpreting Pashtunwali through the lived experiences of young Pashtun women at the University of Peshawar. The paper focuses on two core values of Pashtunwali: Ghairat (honour) and pardah (veil). Ghairat dictates actions to uphold personal and family honour, and pardah refers to gender segregation and modesty. Since the study explores the lived experiences of young, educated Pashtun women, a qualitative approach is adopted, which involves semi-structured interviews with selected educated Pashtun women. The findings reveal that educated women express their agency by identifying with and upholding the norms of Pashtunwali through the negotiation of its meaning. They acknowledge that Ghairat and Purdah are subject to reinterpretation and adaptation by women within a particular context, thus reflecting the flexible nature of Pashtunwali. The study indicates that educated Pashtun women negotiate the meaning of cultural norms usually done by men. The findings have implications for understanding gender dynamics and cultural identity among Pashtuns, particularly in the context of higher education.

Keywords: Pashtunwali, Ghairat, Pardah, Pashtun women, Peshawar, Pashtun identity, Gender, Cultural code, Pashtun society, Honour, Veil, Gender segregation, Modesty.

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1. Introduction

Pashtuns are a sizeable ethnic group scattered across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Anthropologists have suggested that Pashtuns follow a cultural code called ‘Pashtunwali’ with varying degrees based on their ecological settings (Barth, 1959, 1969; Ahmad, 1980). The prevailing values in the Pashtunwali are similar to lifestyle guidelines that are to be observed by every Pashtun (Strickland, 2007). In other words, the Pashtuns view Pashtunwali as their unwritten code of conduct and ethics (Ginsburg, 2011) and a set of historically constructed cultural values and norms that dictate how Pashtuns should live and behave individually and collectively (Hawkins, 2009; Junaid, 2010; Ross, 2010). Barth (1969) noted that a body of customs common to all Pashtun characterizes a Pashtun. To substantiate his argument, Barth famously stated a Pashto proverb, “*He is Pashtun who does Pashto, not (just) the person who communicates in Pashto*” (Barth, 1969). The core values of Pashtunwali, such as Ghairat (honour) and Pardah (privacy), etc have long attracted local and international scholars seeking to understand this cultural framework (Barth, 1969; Ahmad, 1980; Benson & Siddiqui, 2014; Pamir et al., 2023; Bartlotti, 2001; Tainter & MacGregor, 2011).

Generally, Ghairat in Pashtunwali refers to honour, self-esteem, pride, bravery, zeal, anger, or dignity. This is the most complex precept of the Pashtunwali. For Pashtuns, *Ghairat* dictates actions aimed at upholding one’s honour and safeguarding the honour of the family and community. A person to whom a *Ghairat* is attributed is called a *ghairatmand*. A *ghairatmand* Pashtun personifies the real Pashtun by not simply speaking Pashto but being eager to do so and putting in the utmost effort (Rzehak, 2011). Pardah, on the other hand, refers to the concept of a veil or seclusion and modesty, particularly concerning women. It dictates strict guidelines on gender segregation and maintaining boundaries to preserve the honour and reputation of families. Pardah extends beyond physical barriers to encompass behavioural norms and social expectations, ensuring the community's preservation of virtue and respectability. Together, Ghairat and Pardah form the integral components of Pashtunwali, shaping interpersonal relationships, societal structures, and cultural identity.

With few exceptions (Grima, 2004; Ahmed, 2006), most of the existing research on Pashtunwali shows a predominately men-centric perspective (Ahmed et al., 2017), where men remain the focal point, and women are largely neglected. This bias has led to a potential gap in understanding how Pashtunwali understood and interpreted young women, particularly in the contemporary era. Despite women’s possible role in Pashtun society, their perspectives, epistemes, and interpretations of Pashtunwali remain underrepresented in scholarly literature. One study revealed that women play an essential role in transmitting the values of Pashtunwali from one generation of Pashtuns to the next generation (Aziz et al., 2021). Elderly Pashtun women (*Masherani Khazi*) are considered guardians and custodians of the transmission of their culture, particularly to young girls (*Jenakai*). Interestingly, regardless of socio-demographic status, Pashtun women identify and uphold various characteristics and values recognised, practised, and passed down to generations (Aziz et al., 2021). Aziz et al (2021) argues that “Young Pashtun women claimed the role of mothers in teaching their children basic values, principles, and practices”. Younger people respect their elders, and they do not dare to go unnoticed and disregard the orders and practices of their elders (Aziz, et al., 2021). Such scholarly explanations overlook the agency of young Pashtun women who may present their understanding of the cultural norms.

The above scholarly explanations refer to a historical context where the Pashtunwali is viewed

from a man's perspective. Historically, Pashtun society has been patriarchal, where men hold the position of authority while women are pushed to secondary status and roles. This societal structure has contributed to the dominance of male voices in Pashtunwali's discussion, leaving women's perspectives primarily overlooked. Thus, looking at Pashtunwali through the female lens is essential for a more inclusive view of this cultural code. Therefore, there is a need to explore women's perspectives and how they experience Pashtunwali. In this study, only two core values of Pashtunwali are studied i.e., Ghairat (honour/dignity) and pardah (veil/seclusion). The primary research question of this study is how young Pashtun women perceive and experience Ghairat and Pardah at the University of Peshawar? The study aims to explore and analyse the relevance of the core values of Pashtunwali, such as Ghairat and Pardah, to the lives of educated women studying at universities. It also looks into how these values impact their daily experiences, influencing their interactions with others, choices, and aspirations.

2. Pashtunwali, patriarchy and women's marginality: a literature review

The participation of women in Pashtun society has been profoundly affected by a dominant patriarchal social system in which women are largely excluded from decision-making, and their perspective is often marginalized. This gender discrimination is historically rooted in cultural values that have empowered men over women in every sphere of life, particularly in terms of economic status. Numerous studies have analysed various aspects of this male-dominated social system and its impact on the marginalization of women in Pashtun society. The literature review provides a brief overview of these studies.

Historically, it has been considered indecent for women in Pashtun society to be outside their homes in public spheres. This results in limited public space for women and minimized involvement in political activities, economic happenings, and the structure of society (Rahim, 2021). Social capital is a key channel for women's empowerment. Bilal and Ahmad (2021) analysed women's social capital in the Pashtun region through the lens of intersectionality and matrices of domination. Their study suggests that women's social capital is not sound enough due to their weak social circle, and women have less social support from their families for their social participation in society (Bilal & Ahmad, 2021). This lack of social support significantly limits women's empowerment and reduces their ability to participate in broader community activities, thus restricting their chances of social and economic progress.

Further focusing on women's participation in higher education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Khattak (2014) reveals that women face significant challenges due to the conservative interpretations and practices of religion specific to Pashtun culture, which heavily influences their decisions. Attitudes toward women's work and the language of instruction used in education also affect their educational opportunities. Women from all economic classes struggle with making autonomous decisions; they often seek approval from their families, particularly their male relatives. The notion of religious impediments for women in Pashtun society is further supported by Azim, (2021), who writes that the clergy (mullahs) and Pakistani state laws are significant sources of women's marginalization in Pashtun society (Azim, 2021). Mullahs, in particular, combined religious doctrine with Pashtunwali (the traditional Pashtun code of conduct) to diminish the position of women in politics and decision-making processes within society.

Building on the literature discussed above, it is now clear that the marginalization of women

in Pashtun society is mainly due to traditional Pashtunwali codes, which shape men's perception of women's roles in Pashtun society. These codes give men power and keep women out of critical decision-making, leading to widespread gender discrimination.

Measuring men's perceptions of women in Pashtun society, Aamir Jamal explains that Pashtuns are highly sensitive to women's image and identity (Jamal, 2014). For instance, some men refused to take their wives to the hospital to avoid seeing others. He further noted that Pashtuns often avoid saying women's names in public. He also adds that, due to ongoing wars and conflicts in the region, an extremist and violent version of Islam has emerged and spread among Pashtuns. This interpretation strictly defines and restricts women's status, roles, and responsibilities according to radical conservative religious views (Jamal, 2014).

There is a critical view of literature developed on Pashtunwali from postcolonial writers that traces the use of masculine and gendered language in literature about Pashtun society back to colonial era authors, starting with Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779–1859). His writings established what Hopkins refers to as the “Elphinstonian episteme.” Both colonial and modern portrayals of Pashtuns often focus on elements of Pashtunwali that emphasize revenge, Pashtun resistance against British rule, their involvement in the anti-Soviet Afghan Jihad (1979-1989), the largely Pashtun makeup of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and the participation of some Pashtun tribes in anti-US militancy after 2001 (Alimia, 2022; Khan et al., 2022; Afridi et al., 2024).

There is also a general perception in Pashtun society that women do not perceive themselves as underprivileged. Instead, they perceive themselves as a vital and prestigious part of the family and broader Pashtun society. However, limited academic work has focused on this view regarding women. Therefore, to fill this literature gap, this study is organized to understand the agency of Pashtun women in interpreting and negotiating cultural norms such as Ghairat and pardah.

3. Research methods

Keeping in view the nature and objectives of the study, the qualitative research design was adopted to understand how young, educated Pashtun women perceive and experience the hair and pariah of Pashtunwali. It is essential to mention that one aspect of this study was examining the influence of participants' socio-demographic profiles on their views of Pashtunwali. This included age, education level, urban and rural, family background, and exposure to modern educational environments. This study also considered participants' social roles and identities within their families and communities, recognizing that these roles can shape their understanding of Pashtunwali and their lived experiences.

According to Pakistan Education Statistics (*PES 2021-22 Reduced.Pdf*, n.d.), out of the country's total population, only 4% has access to universities, constituting the portion of the public with access to social media platforms, television, academic material, and more opportunities to interact with other genders, students, and academicians. Therefore, university education exposes these women to broader learning spaces, media, and interactions with other genders and scholars, offering a unique perspective compared to traditional Pashtun women without such exposure. For this reason, this paper mainly explores the perspectives and experiences of educated females at the University of Peshawar.

For data collection, fifteen participants were chosen through convenience sampling, which involved selecting individuals who were easily and readily accessible. Researchers often prefer convenience sampling because it is cost-effective and more straightforward than other methods. According to Taherdoost (2016), it can also address various constraints commonly encountered in research (Taherdoost, 2016). This sampling technique was used because it was easy and convenient to collect data from a readily available population studying at the same institute. Also, due to the cultural sensitivity of male-female interaction, even in research settings, convenient sampling was the most appropriate method to reach out to and get in-depth information from female respondents. The study population consisted of young women aged 18 to 35 years with varying levels of education, including undergraduate and postgraduate students. The rationale behind selecting educated females from the University of Peshawar is that it is the central and most representative institute of higher education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in May 2024 at the Peshawar campus of the University of Peshawar. All interviews were recorded using a mobile voice recorder with the permission of the interviewees. Ethical considerations were followed rigorously throughout the study. The participants were informed about the study's purpose and potential risks, and consent was obtained from each participant. Their responses were transcribed and then translated into English, as the interviews were conducted in Pashto, the mother language of the educated females. After the data were collected through in-depth interviews, they were analysed using the thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). Thematic analysis was used because of its accessibility and flexibility for people new to the research (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

4. Understanding, interpreting and negotiating cultural norms by the educated Pashtun women of Peshawar University

In these sections, we analyse the interviews conducted for data collection with female students at the University of Peshawar. Through Thematic analysis nine themes related to *Ghairat and Pardah* in the context of Pashtunwali were identified. Primarily, we develop two indicators. First, in support of *Ghairat and Pardah*, they discuss the perception and experience that favour it. Second, in opposition to *Ghairat and Pardah*, perceptions and experiences that oppose it. It was interesting to note that some of the criticism was constructive, encompassing multiple views emerging from the participants' real-life experiences. We categorize constructive criticism as a sub-section of the second indicator. Through these favourable and critical approaches to cultural norms, these young Pashtun women negotiate the meaning of these cultural norms and develop an understanding that is more relevant and meaningful to their existence.

4.1. Finding value in *Ghairat and Pardah*: contextualizing the meaning of cultural norms

Some research participants had a supportive perception and experience of *Ghairat and Pardah*. One research participant stated, "*Ghairat is a very positive thing to stand up for whatever is right and whoever is right.*" (Farwa, personal communication, May 21, 2024). For Farwa, *Ghairat* has a positive connotation because it implies standing against the odds for what is right and defending whoever is right. Interestingly, anthropologists have pointed out that one of the features of Pashtunwali is to stand against the oppressor for the oppressed (Barth, 1959). Barth

(1959) emphasises Pashtunwali plays a visible role in maintaining social order and justice. In the same line of argument, one of my research participants expressed her perception of *Ghairat*,

Ideally, sending girls to educational institutions should be because of *Ghairat*—doing what’s suitable for our society. We are *Ghairatmand* (possess *Ghairat*) when we give other genders an equal, level playing field so they can avail themselves of opportunities (Farwa, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

The above statement refers to multiple aspects of women’s life in a patriarchal society. It depicts that education is essential to women’s empowerment in Pashtun society. This empowerment is usually expected by giving women multiple opportunities through education. Such a development is imperative because Pashtun men see women in their private life as ‘helpless’ and ‘powerless’ *‘khazay ajaiz qam day, be wasa de’* (Ahmed, 2013). The young research participants in this study think that ensuring the right to education will go a long way toward empowering women in Pashtun society and helping them overcome their ‘helplessness’ and ‘powerlessness’.

More interestingly, these young women associate a cultural norm of *Ghairat* with giving women the right to education. They think that education is a right of a Pashtun girl, which must be enforced through the cultural norm of *Ghairat*, which in this context would mean doing what is right and just. What is right and just for women in Pashtun society is to get educated. Therefore, *Ghairat* is believed to be a conduct or practice that reflects the new realities of the life of these young, educated women who themselves are exposed to the empowerment they feel other women are denied in Pashtun society. The existing literature does not extensively report such an association.

Within the education context, some respondents interpreted *Ghairat* to be ensuring a harassment-free environment for female students. Ayesha emphasized that *‘For Pashtun girls, Ghairat is different; for her, Ghairat is a (social responsibility) of protection from harassment on roads or in educational institutions’* (Ayesha, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Ayesha asserts that true *Ghairat* should include offering equal opportunities for all genders, such that it should ensure that women are not harassed in public and private places. Now, it is interesting to note that the different interpretations of *Ghairat* shape the perceptions and experiences.

In the Pashto language, the word *Sattar* (Pardah) is used in the context of observing Pardah. Observing *Sattar* has become seasoned in the roots of Pashtunwali and Pashtun women. In Pashtun culture, both women and men are constantly told and retold about their roles, boundaries, obligations, and protocols attached to their socially constructed identities by their elders (Aziz et al., 2021). This means that both genders are considerate about their interaction, mobility, and adherence to desired behaviour and attitude expected out of them at an individual and communal level.

Most young, educated Pashtun women affirmed that Pashtuns are watchful of their elders’ practices and character in confirming Pashtunwali and related traits. Pardah is one such significant aspect of Pashtunwali, serving as both a cultural tradition and a religious practice. One of the respondents narrated, *“Mostly, young girls follow or emulate the Pardah of their mothers. It is something you learn from your elders (parents).”* (Maham, personal communication, May 21, 2024). It has also become phenomenal from multiple viewpoints

generated by these educated Pashtun women about Pardah, which is closely associated with family values among Pashtuns. They disclosed a strong connection between observing Pardah and the role of their family values system (its essence) in defining, adapting, transmitting, and internalizing the particular code of Pashtunwali. These young, educated Pashtun women believe in upholding familial values through Pardah.

Furthermore, Islam and Pashtunwali are fundamental aspects of Pashtun identity, with scholars debating whether they coalesce or coexist alongside each other (Jan & Aman, 2015). Some respondents viewed Pardah as a cultural and religious practice, stating that Pashtunwali can go hand in hand with Islam. Barth (1959) elaborates that Pashtun customs are always imagined to be in line with Islamic preaching, while Ahmed (1980) argues that there is an inseparable bond between Pashtunness and Muslimness. According to Ahmed (1980), “he is by definition a Muslim just as by birth he obtains the inalienable right to Pashtunness. His place in society as a Pashtun and a Muslim is thus secured and defined from the moment of birth.” These perceptions make Pashtuns confident (Jan, 2010) and satisfied with their culture and religion.

Considerably, young, educated Pashtun women were aware of the meaning, structure, and rationale behind the concept of Pardah in Pashtunwali. They affirmed that irrespective of gender and social identity, one should wear or carry a dress covering one’s body. Young Pashtun women have also identified the transitional phase of Pardah and practices different from their mothers and grandmother’s time. They believed elderly Pashtun women were quite strait-laced in their practices, especially observing and sustaining Pardah. This is in terms of a specific/ traditional dress code and on all occasions (private and public). However, this strictness has lessened among the new generation, who now have multiple options regarding modest and modern dressing trends. As Maham told, “*There are so many friends of mine who don’t practice Pardah, but it doesn’t mean they are bad*” (Maham, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

This section of analysis highlights how some educated Pashtun women view *Ghairat and Pardah* positively as essential cultural and religious practices that offer empowerment and uphold family values. The influence of social status is evident, with women from more financially stable backgrounds perceiving *Ghairat* as a means of standing up for what is right and promoting educational opportunities for girls. Education is seen as a transformative tool, empowering women to challenge societal norms. Despite the patriarchal context, these women emphasize the role of education in achieving gender equality and autonomy. Finally, the support for *Ghairat and Pardah* is tied to cultural identity, religious values, and the pursuit of educational and personal empowerment.

4.2. Questioning the patriarchal interpretation of *Ghairat* and *Pardah*: structural constraints limiting the agency of young Pashtun women

Some of the young Pashtun student participants were critical of how *Ghairat* and *Pardah* are interpreted in the patriarchal ways in Pashtun society. They believe that these cultural practices are discriminatory towards women and often become a tool in the hands of men to control women in Pashtun society. Women are frequently seen suppressed in the name of *Ghairat* because they are told to uphold the honour of the family.

Ayesha, a research participant, argued, ‘*Ghairat for men is veiling their women, forcing women to prepare meals for them and to live a life under men’s feet*’ (Ayesha, personal communication,

May 22, 2024). This statement highlights the gendered implications of *Ghairat*, where women's roles are typically defined and then judged more harshly than men's. The cultural interpretation of *Ghairat* promotes patriarchal standards; along with this, it also restricts women's independence and promotes inequity. As discussed by Ayesha men see *Ghairat* to decide the dress code and what women would do.

Noticeably, *Ghairat*, or personal honour, is a fundamental aspect of Pashtunwali and is the driving force behind the code of conduct for Pashtuns. Men seek to preserve and promote their reputations at all costs by demonstrating their physical courage, generosity, and success in building political alliances or winning disputes to add to a reputation. Equally important is defending a reputation against insult or attack. This includes protecting one's property (particularly land) or protecting the family's honour, especially women. This puts a significant responsibility on women also because they have to protect not just their honour but the associated honour of their family.

Our research participants argued that such expectations would disempower women in ways that they lose their agency regarding matters of honour. Often, due to the fear of dishonour, women keep silent on sensitive issues of harassment. For instance, Laiba asserted,

If something (harassment) happens to me, I cannot discuss it (with anyone) because I am a Pashtun woman (I need to protect my honour). I cannot speak about it, as it would tarnish my honour and that of my parents. If I share anything with someone, I must consider honour. For a Pashtun girl, one must consistently worry about numerous things simultaneously. (Laiba, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

The above statement indicates that women are constantly under pressure from cultural norms and struggle to find an agency to resist wrongdoing. They are careful to avoid any mishap and when such mishap happens these young women find themselves in difficult situations to avoid harming their and family honour. One participant revealed her situation in a story,

Once we were followed by some men to our university hostel, I called the police and informed them that a car with this number was tailing us from our department to the hostel. However, I felt threatened. What if this man had seen my face, and given that law enforcement agencies in Pakistan is not particularly robust? They could come after me, and he would have me. Secondly, I feared that if my father were to find out about this incident, he might ask me why I walked that route and why I hadn't worn my dupatta (veil)? (Laiba, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

It is well understood that these accounts depict the oppressive nature of *Ghairat* and its impact on women. The fear of dishonouring families prevents women from seeking justice and protection, and this perpetuates a cycle of silence and suffering. The cultural constructs of honour and shame significantly influence women's lives while it is most of the time leading to their marginalization and suppression. It is evident from the response by Laiba, if you want to go out, you must be in the company of a brother or husband. It seems like I am living in a constant threat because of my woman gender. (Liba, Personal Communication, May 20, 2024).

The intersection of cultural and patriarchal values in traditional societies like Pashtun can lead to significant constraints on women's agency, autonomy and rights. Such a disadvantage is compounded by the weak state institutions responsible for the protection of citizens. The

Pashtun society is not only patriarchal and conservative in its orientation (Yousaf, 2021). Yousaf argues that in such a “patriarchal conservative” society, gender rights violations are often justified under “tradition” and “state-defined” religion.

Moreover, like *Ghairat*, *Pardah* is a critical component of Pashtunwali with varied perceptions and experiences among educated women. For some young, educated women, *Pardah* gives a sense of protection, but for others, it signifies a cultural imposition that inhibits their independence.

Pardah is a blend of religion and culture. I take it as a religious norm. But I was more culturally bound to practice it. I feel uncomfortable when someone is staring at me. When I am in *Pardah*, I feel more secure. It may be my psychological disposition. (Afshan, Personal Communication, May 22, 2024)

Another participant shared her personal experiences of how *Pardah* was interpreted by her father to discourage her from joining a media profession.

I believe that *Pardah* is a very constructed concept. From my personal experience, I have been interested in the profession of television show presenter. I discussed this with my father, who said, "No, you can't be on screen because of *Pardah* and for your protection." (Laiba, Personal Communication, May 20, 2024)

These personal accounts reflect the complexity of *Pardah* as both a protective measure and a restrictive practice. Barth (1959) insists that *Pardah* means seclusion of women and through it, the ‘virility and primacy of the male’ in society is ensured. This aligns with the cultural perspective that sees *Pardah* as a means of controlling women’s visibility and movements to maintain male dominance. While some women view *Pardah* as a security source, others see it as a barrier to their professional aspirations and personal freedom. Similarly, such cultural norms are often used to justify gender-based restrictions under the guise of protection and honour.

In this section, the psychological stress faced by young Pashtun women due to the cultural restraints imposed by *Ghairat* is explored. The interviews reveal that *Ghairat* often leads to gender discrimination, with women’s actions being judged more harshly than men’s. This patriarchal interpretation of *Ghairat* restricts women’s independence and promotes inequity. The fear of dishonouring their families prevents women from seeking justice, perpetuating a cycle of silence and suffering. Respondents highlight the need to redefine *Ghairat* to include offering equal opportunities and protection for all genders, emphasizing that true honour should not involve oppressing women.

4.3. Emphasizing the dynamism of cultural norms through the agency of reinterpretation: a way forward

The cultural norms, including the broader Pashtunwali code, are seen by the educated Pashtun women as a dynamic code that requires reinterpretation and revision to meet the contemporary needs and reflect the new situations of young, educated Pashtun women. This is not just an expression of desire but a statement to act. Afshan, one of the interviewees, mentions, “*Culture maintains its identity. It evolved with time. If it is not evolving, it cannot be sustained. I believe Pashtunwali has so much evolved*” (Afshan, personal communication, May 22, 2024). This

suggests the dynamic nature of Pashtunwali, believing that it can adapt and remain relevant in contemporary society. This view of Afshan is put in order with a broader understanding that cultural practices must evolve to stay meaningful and sustainable. Similarly, the same sentiment was shared by Farwa, who states,

As far as I know, Pashtunwali is an excellent concept if properly implemented. It would be a significant contribution to society for both men and women. We should strive for a more progressive society and embrace modern themes; otherwise, we will be left far behind (Farwa, personal communication, 22 May 2024).

The research participants emphasized that to make *Ghairat* and *Pardah* relevant to contemporary existence, its meaning must be revisited and reinterpreted. The young Pashtun women at the University of Peshawar repeated these views. Farwa's perspective on *Pardah* emphasized the need for personal choice in observing *Pardah*: "*Our priority should be 'let women be.' Let them do what they want to do. As long as they aren't hurting someone physically or emotionally*" (Farwa, personal communication, May 22, 2024). This view supports the idea that *Pardah* should not be enforced but adopted voluntarily based on personal beliefs and comfort levels.

The above analysis reveals that while *Ghairat* and *Pardah* are deeply rooted in Pashtun culture, they are also subject to reinterpretation and adaptation, thus reflecting the evolving nature of Pashtunwali. The research participants understand Pashtunwali as neither a rigid nor static cultural code of conduct but rather dynamic and transformative. Interestingly, many researchers have endorsed such an understanding of Pashtunwali (Jan, 2010, Aziz et al., 2021, Banerjee, 2000). Moreover, the dynamism of Pashtunwali is essential for its survival. These young, educated Pashtun women believe that Pashtunwali can only be relevant if it changes in response to the actual conditions of their lives.

5. Conclusion

For young, educated Pashtun women, cultural constructs of *Ghairat* and *pardah* significantly influence their lives, manifesting as protective measures and restrictive practices. The support for *Ghairat* and *pardah* among some respondents highlights their role in preserving cultural and religious identity, which offers protection and moral integrity. However, this support is often contingent upon an understanding that these cultural norms are subject to contextual interpretation relevant to the lived experiences of these young women. The sharp critique of *Ghairat* and *Pardah* by some Pashtun women underscores the manifested gender discrimination that these constructs can perpetuate due to the meaning associated by the men with these norms. The narratives reveal that *Ghairat* is most of the time seen as a mechanism for controlling women's behaviour by men; thereby, it reinforces patriarchal norms and restricts women's autonomy. Such interpretations require revisiting by Pashtuns, more emphatically by women. The analysis above indicates that the young, educated Pashtun women's reinterpretation of *Ghairat* is seen by them as an endeavour to make it aligned with contemporary values of gender equality and personal freedom and by promoting *Pardah* as an individual choice rather than a cultural imposition, they see it as a transformative cultural practice generating supportive frameworks for women's empowerment in Pashtun society.

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