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Exploring the Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Female Suicide in Yasin District Ghizer: Perspectives of Influential Stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

Female suicide in Yasin District Ghizer, Pakistan, is a critical social issue deeply rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and psychological factors. This qualitative study explores the perspectives of influential stakeholders, including a social worker, a media professional, and a police officer, to understand the underlying causes and risk factors associated with female suicides. The findings reveal that traditional gender roles, male dominance, early and forced marriages, and societal expectations significantly restrict women's autonomy, contributing to depression, social rejection, and suicide. Marital conflicts, domestic violence, and communication gaps further exacerbate vulnerabilities, while cases of honor killings are often misreported as suicides, obscuring the issue's true extent. Stakeholders emphasized the role of poverty, mental health stigma, and limited awareness of rights in perpetuating these challenges. They called for enhanced community awareness, improved mental health support, and gender-sensitive policies to address systemic inequalities. While this study provides valuable insights, its scope is limited by the small sample size and the exclusion of direct female perspectives. Future research should include broader community participation and prioritize gender-inclusive approaches to develop effective interventions for preventing female suicides in traditional societies like Yasin. This qualitative study investigated the issue of female suicide in Yasin District Ghizer by employing semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights. Using purposive sampling, four influential community members were selected as participants. The interviews, guided by a structured framework, explored themes such as socio-cultural roles, socio-economic pressures, community

awareness, and law enforcement policies. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with responses transcribed, coded, and categorized to identify recurring themes. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, were strictly adhered to. However, the study acknowledges limitations, including the small sample size and the absence of direct female perspectives in this phase of the research.

Introduction

The present study focuses on female suicides in District Ghizer, Gilgit-Baltistan, which has been identified as having the highest prevalence of female suicides compared to other district in the region, according to Ghizer Police reports. The research aims to explore the social and cultural factors contributing to this alarming trend and understand the perceptions of local residents, including those from the NGO sector, police, media, and social work. By shedding light on this critical issue, the study hopes to provide actionable recommendations to address it effectively.

Suicide, the intentional act of self-harm leading to death, is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors. These include mental health disorders such as depression, personality disorders, and alcohol dependence, as well as physical illnesses like neurological disorders, cancer, and HIV (Reiss and Dombeck, 2007). Suicide rates are also shaped by the strength of social ties. Both excessively strong and weak social bonds can increase the risk, as societal changes disrupt traditional connections, leaving individuals feeling isolated and unsupported (Shaffer, 1999).

Globally, suicide is a significant public health issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one person dies by suicide every 40 seconds, amounting to nearly one million deaths annually. The global suicide incidence rate is approximately 11.5 per 100,000 people. WHO estimates that 5% of people worldwide attempt suicide at least once in their lifetime (WHO, 2013). Suicide rates vary across regions, with the highest rates reported in Eastern Europe, such as Lithuania and Russia, and the lowest in Latin America. Notably, China has one of the highest female suicide rates globally (WHO, 2010).

Among young people aged 15 to 24, the suicide rate has tripled since the 1950s, making it a leading cause of death. Common factors linked to suicide include feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and an inability to cope with societal expectations (Suicide.org, 2002). In male-dominated societies like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and India, women face heightened risks due to domestic violence, gender inequality, and cultural pressures (Hendin, 2008).

While poverty and mental health challenges affect both genders, women experience additional burdens due to societal norms and cultural expectations that demand conformity. In many Asian countries, socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors shape suicide patterns and responses. Subgroups facing socio-economic disadvantages often exhibit higher suicide rates. Cultural norms, such as expectations for women to maintain submissive roles in marriage, exacerbate the issue. Religious beliefs can also influence suicide rates, with some faiths explicitly prohibiting it, potentially serving as a protective factor.

In Pakistan, the Human Rights Commission recorded 2,040 suicides in 2007, including 692 cases involving women. Financial hardship and domestic problems, often tied to economic struggles, were cited as major triggers. In Gilgit-Baltistan, a region with a population of around 2 million—99% of whom are Muslims—Islamic teachings emphasize gender equality, granting women rights such as inheritance, marriage choice, and employment. However, societal practices often deny women these rights.

In District Ghizer, cultural norms heavily restrict women's autonomy and decision-making power, contributing to their marginalization. The prevalence of arranged marriages, with little tolerance for marriages of choice, often leads to verbal and physical violence against women who deviate from societal expectations. Gender-based violence, including honor killings, remains a persistent issue. Even educational institutions, such as the region's sole university, face social prejudices that discourage interaction between genders. These factors collectively create an environment where women see suicide as their only escape from systemic inequalities and cultural injustices (Pamir Times GB, 2010).

The Ghizer Police have reported a consistent rise in female suicides, prompting the government to establish a Women's Police Department in 2011. This department aims to address issues such as domestic violence and suicide while identifying underlying causes and implementing prevention strategies. However, these efforts remain insufficient in addressing the deeply rooted social and cultural dynamics that perpetuate female suicides in the region.

This study's focus on Yasin, Ghizer's traditional societal structure reveals how limited agency and decision-making power among women contribute to their vulnerability. By examining the interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The findings will inform strategies to mitigate female suicides and foster a more equitable and supportive environment for women in Yasin and beyond.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of suicide, defined by Durkheim (1952) as a death resulting from a positive or negative act directly or indirectly executed by the individual himself, remains a serious social and public health issue. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that in 2011, approximately 797,823 people worldwide died by suicide, accounting for 1.5% of total mortality, and 16% of deaths from injuries (WHO, 2013). Further projections by the WHO indicate that by 2020, nearly 1.53 million people will die by suicide globally, with 10-20 times more individuals attempting suicide (WHO, 2013).

Although suicide rates are universally alarming, a disproportionate burden of this issue is carried by countries in Asia. In particular, countries such as China, India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan report disproportionately high suicide rates, with rural areas often being more affected (Chen et al., 2011; Zhang, 2010). These figures indicate not only the prevalence of suicide in these regions but also reflect the socio-cultural and psychological underpinnings that contribute to the high

In many Asian societies, including South Asia, gender roles and cultural norms significantly influence the prevalence of suicide, especially among women. While women generally commit fewer suicides than men, studies reveal that women are more likely to attempt suicide and may use less lethal methods (Kushner, 1985). In male-dominated societies, where women often experience

high levels of domestic violence, honor-related crimes, and limited autonomy, female suicides are alarmingly high (Mannig, 2012). The pressure to conform to rigid gender roles, particularly regarding marriage and family obligations, is a contributing factor (Vigderhous & Fishman, 1997). In India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the social expectation for women to endure marital struggles, even in abusive relationships, increases their vulnerability to suicidal ideation (Gururaj et al., 2004).

The situation is exacerbated by practices such as dowry systems, where unmet expectations for dowries can lead to harassment and emotional distress for young brides, sometimes culminating in suicide (Kumar, 2004). Women's social isolation, particularly in patriarchal societies, further compounds the issue, as they may have limited access to support networks or resources to escape domestic violence (Sawitri et al., 2011). Furthermore, societal disapproval of divorce or remarriage for women limits their ability to find alternative solutions, leading some to resort to suicide as a form of escape (Kushner, 1985; Asghar & Mumtaz, 2024).

A distinguishing characteristic in many Asian countries is the higher suicide rates in rural areas compared to urban centers. For instance, in China, suicide rates are three times higher in rural areas than in urban areas (Zhang, 2010), and a similar trend is observed in India (Kumar, 2008). The lack of access to mental health services, isolation, and economic hardships prevalent in rural communities are critical risk factors contributing to these disparities. Rural women, in particular, face a unique set of challenges, including limited access to healthcare, educational resources, and economic independence. These social and cultural constraints increase their vulnerability to suicide, with marital dissatisfaction and financial stress frequently cited as triggering factors (Kumar, 2008).

In Pakistan, suicide is often underreported due to cultural and religious stigma. The societal taboos surrounding suicide prevent many families from acknowledging or reporting suicides, especially among women. According to the Aurat Foundation (2011), 402 cases of suicide were reported in Pakistan in 2011, with the highest number of suicides occurring in Punjab, followed by Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These figures may be underestimations due to the stigma attached to suicide and the lack of official statistics on the issue (Khan & Prince, 2003).

In the northern regions of Pakistan, particularly in Gilgit-Baltistan, suicide rates are notably high among women. In Ghizer district, for example, 369 women reportedly committed suicide between 2005 and 2011, with family conflicts, domestic violence, and gender-based violence being key contributing factors (Dawn, 2011). The patriarchal social structure in these regions leaves women with limited avenues for escape, which exacerbates the risk of suicide. Family pressures, forced marriages, and the rigid enforcement of gender roles often trap women in cycles of despair, leading to suicidal behavior (Khan, 2018).

Religious beliefs and cultural attitudes toward suicide significantly impact the prevalence of this issue. While suicide is generally condemned across most major world religions, the interpretation of these beliefs varies. Durkheim (1952) argued that religious commitment provides individuals with a sense of purpose and structure, potentially reducing the likelihood of suicide. In Christianity, although the Bible does not directly address suicide, modern Christian doctrine views it as a sin, akin to murder (Mans et al., 2000). In Islam, suicide is strictly forbidden, and the act is considered a violation of God's will (Gearing & Lizardi, 2009).

Hinduism, in contrast, has more ambivalent views on suicide, with some interpretations suggesting that life's cyclical nature and reincarnation soften the stigma associated with suicide (Hassan, 1983; Ineichen, 1998). Nevertheless, in South Asia, the overarching cultural and religious prohibition against suicide places those who attempt or complete suicide at the margins of society, further contributing to social isolation and stigma.

Preventing suicide in South Asia requires a multifaceted approach, particularly in regions where the issue is most acute. Research highlights the importance of reducing access to lethal means of suicide as a critical preventive measure. In countries such as New Zealand, Sri Lanka, and China, interventions like barriers on bridges, restrictions on pesticide sales, and better regulation of firearms have proven effective in reducing suicide rates (Phillips et al., 2008). However, South Asia faces unique challenges, including the reluctance to report suicides, cultural resistance to mental health interventions, and limited resources in rural areas (Vijayakumar et al., 2005).

A comprehensive approach that includes improving mental health services, reducing the stigma associated with suicide, and addressing the socio-cultural factors that contribute to suicide is necessary. Education programs targeting the youth, particularly in rural areas, could help build resilience and coping mechanisms, while awareness campaigns could reduce the stigma around mental illness and suicide (Khan et al., 2008).

Suicide remains a significant public health issue in South Asia, particularly among women and rural populations. The socio-cultural and psychological factors that contribute to high suicide rates in this region are complex, involving gender inequality, domestic violence, marital pressures, and social isolation. Religion and cultural norms also play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward suicide, either exacerbating the stigma or providing a framework for prevention. To reduce suicide rates, especially in countries like Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, there is a need for more research, better reporting systems, and comprehensive suicide prevention programs that address the underlying socio-cultural issues.

Research Objectives

- To understand the socio-cultural roles and responsibilities of men and women in Ghizer society.
- To explore the underlying causes and risk factors associated with female suicides in the district.
- To examine the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding the issue and the possible interventions.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

Qualitative research was employed to gain in-depth insights into the issue of female suicide in Yasin District Ghizer.

Research Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with influential community members to understand their perceptions, experiences, and recommendations regarding female suicide.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted influential individuals who are actively involved in community development and decision-making in Yasin District Ghizer.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select four interviewees based on their potential to provide valuable insights.

Participants

The interviewees included:

1. A social worker (President of the Local Council)
2. A media person
3. A representative of ITREB - Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board
4. SHO (Station House Officer) from the police department

Data Collection

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant.

Interview Guide

The interviews began with general questions about the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the contemporary society of Yasin district Ghizer, gradually moving into the participants' fields of expertise. The discussion was divided into the following themes:

1. **Socio-Cultural Roles of Men and Women**
    - Perceptions of gender roles in Yasin Ghizer society.
    - How societal expectations influence women’s mental health.
2. **Socio-Economic and Cultural Pressures**
    - Economic challenges faced by women.
    - Cultural practices and their impact on women’s well-being.
3. **Community Awareness and Support Systems**
    - Role of local organizations, media, and religious institutions in addressing female suicide.
    - Availability of mental health support in the district.
4. **Law Enforcement and Policy**
    - Perspectives on how law enforcement deals with female suicide cases.
    - Suggestions for policy interventions.

Data Analysis

Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. The responses were transcribed, coded, and categorized into recurring themes to derive meaningful insights.

Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent:** Each participant was briefed about the study's purpose and voluntarily agreed to participate.
- **Confidentiality:** The identities of the participants and any sensitive information were kept confidential.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** The interviews were conducted in a culturally respectful manner, considering the community's norms and values.

Limitations of the Study

- The study is limited to the perspectives of four individuals, which may not represent the entire community.
- Female perspectives on the issue were not directly included in this phase of the research.

Thematic Analysis of Interviews Conducted From Influential People

The researcher conducted four interviews from influential people who were residents of Yasin. These potential people included a social worker (president local council), a media person, an alwaiz (ITREB), and an SHO from the police department.

The discussion with interviewees started from general views regarding roles and responsibilities of men and women in the contemporary society of Yasin and proceeded according to the fields of the interview. The discussion can be divided into the following themes:

Family Setup and Division of Labor

The division of roles and responsibilities is said to be stereotypical as defined by the interviewees. The inequalities among men and women exist because of this stereotypical division where men are subjected to be the breadwinners and women to be domestic workers. The interviewees further added that "Although in traditional societies women are now going beyond the division as they are getting higher education and doing jobs in different fields." But still, there is an existence of an acceptance issue where a number of roles that a woman wants to perform are not acceptable in society. The examples shared by the interviewees are: "A woman cannot easily choose the field of Law as society thought it to be a male-oriented field; females are never encouraged to select media as a profession because people think that it requires a woman to be more confident, outspoken, and sometimes modern as well." The women who adopt the unacceptable professions—for example, choosing the media field and doing a job as a reporter, local news or radio anchor, or appearing on television—are most of the time disowned by the society and even their families. When females are disowned by their families and face social rejection, they may choose to commit suicide.

Male Dominancy and Women's Autonomy

The division of roles creates dominancy in one gender and makes the other one subordinate. Males having more vital roles and managing outdoor issues become dominant, and women are thought to have less valuable roles and thus are subordinate. The respondents added "That as a traditional society Yasin is also having male dominancy at its peak where men are the only decision-makers, and women have to obey the decisions made by the male members of the family."

Females in the selected culture lack autonomy, thus lacking decision-making power. Literature also highlights that a lack of autonomy leads a woman to problems like suicide, occurring mostly in traditional and male-dominant societies. "Girls lack decision-making to choose their life partner, which becomes a root cause for many evils like honor killing, court marriages, running away from homes, and even suicides," as stated by the respondents.

Common Factors Shared by the Respondents

Domestic Violence and Marital Conflicts

Marital conflicts are a part of married life and have to be solved by negotiation and also by compromise. When the conflicts rise more, they need to be solved either by a third party, council, or police. People sometimes do not share their conflicts with others due to the sake of honor, and thus conflicts remain unsolved and even increase. In the case of domestic violence, the SHO shared that they do receive cases of domestic violence, but still, most of the cases are covered up as they consider it a personal problem. Due to this, police officials are unable to solve or even highlight these cases. Domestic violence, when it becomes unbearable to a woman, makes her choose to get separate or go for suicide more because separation itself is a problem for a woman living in a traditional society.

Forced/Early Marriages

Marriage is a contract for a whole life, and if not decided with the consent of partners, it may fail due to a lack of understanding. Forced marriages have always remained a trend in conservative and traditional societies. Likewise, the respondents shared that the culture of Yasin possesses traditional views where men decide whom their girls should marry. Girls are most of the time excluded from the decision of choosing their partner. When the girls are unable to fight for their right, they choose to harm themselves.

Along with this, when forced marriages are done, the couple lacks understanding, and being unable to develop love for one another creates issues in marital life, which may lead a woman towards suicide.

Talking about early marriages, the respondents said that as education is widely spread in their area now, there is a decrease in child marriages. But a few families, who do not allow their daughters to get higher education, still go for child marriages. The respondents shared that girls who are early-married are obviously not able to manage marital affairs and may get depressed by little issues. The SHO shared, "In previous months, a fifteen-year-old girl was married to a 32-year-old man who belongs to another district of Gilgit-Baltistan. When police investigated, we found that her father had sold her for the sake of 2 lac rupees. A few months later, the girl came back to Yasin

and jumped into the river, thus committing suicide." The SHO further added that they do receive such cases where girls are sold for money, and such cases mostly involve child marriages, which afterwards become a source of female suicide.

Unavailability of Ideal Life Partner

This was the common and most shared reason by the respondents of interviews as well as the household study. The interview respondents said that young girls are now more dedicated to education and are more determined for their future. Comparing to them, boys are not that much serious about education and are not able to make successful futures. When it comes to choosing a partner, girls always want a partner who is educated enough and of equal caliber to theirs. Most of the time, girls do not get ideal partners, and their male family members decide to marry the person they want. This results in young female suicide as they do not want to spend their lives with a less educated and unsuccessful person. Having no other option, they go for suicide.

Psychological Illness

Literature describes mental illness as one of the major reasons contributing to suicide. The respondents were of the same view that females do commit suicide when they are mentally ill. They further added, "As far as female suicides in Yasin are concerned, mental illness seldom becomes the reason for suicide. Instead, other social and cultural factors contribute more to suicides." The SHO said that when suicide cases are reported, the reason shared by the parents is mostly mental illness, as the other reasons may bring shame to the family. They further added that when cases are investigated, the cause of mental illness is rarely found.

Factors Shared By the Alwaiz and Their Perspectives

Workload: A Source of Mental Pressure

Women is now empowered enough to work in various fields and as entrepreneurs. However, the NGO official pointed out that regardless of their earnings, every woman is still expected to manage domestic chores, maintain household budgets, care for children and other family members, and participate in or organize social gatherings to keep relatives and family members connected. Yasin, being an agricultural society, imposes additional work burdens on women, including farming and poultry. Often, women struggle to balance their triple roles—productive, reproductive, and social—and, when they fail to meet societal and familial expectations, they may not be seen as "good women." This intense pressure, the respondent explained, can lead to depression and aggression. When women feel unacknowledged or deemed incapable, they may view themselves as valueless and meaningless, which can tragically lead to suicide.

Strict Norms, Values, and Cultural Taboos

The respondent highlighted that strict norms and cultural values also drive women toward suicide. Yasin's societal expectations place significant emphasis on a woman's honor. Women are not allowed to move freely without a male family member, and interactions with men outside their caste or area can even result in honor killings. These rigid restrictions breed frustration and aggression among women, leading some to view suicide as the only escape.

Lack of Awareness about Rights

Unawareness of rights is another significant factor. When women are unaware of their rights, they cannot fight against harassment or violence. The respondent mentioned, “The literacy rate of men in Yasin is lower than that of women, and being illiterate, men are often unaware of women's rights and unwilling to accept them.” This lack of awareness and acceptance creates significant challenges for women, often leading to feelings of hopelessness and, in some cases, suicide.

Less Exposure of Women

The NGO official emphasized that women with limited exposure to the world often lack the skills to address marital or domestic problems. Conservative cultural norms in Yasin deprive many women of opportunities to gain social exposure or negotiate solutions to their issues. Consequently, women may feel powerless to overcome life’s challenges, pushing them toward despair and suicide.

Factors Shared by the Media Person (Reporter) and Their Perspectives

Association of Honor with Girls only

The media respondent identified Yasin’s cultural association of honor exclusively with women as a major factor contributing to female suicides. Women are bound by restrictions to uphold family honor, and even minor perceived transgressions—such as speaking with a stranger—can lead to shame, honor killings, or extreme restrictions. Feeling trapped by these expectations, some women sees suicide as the only way out.

Poverty

The respondent also discussed poverty as a contributing factor. While poverty affects both men and women, women suffer disproportionately due to being treated as a "second sex." With limited resources prioritized for men, women are often denied opportunities like education or healthcare. This inability to fulfill personal aspirations sometimes leads to suicide.

Extreme Care/Love for Children

The media person noted that excessive care and overprotection can have negative consequences. When overprotected children face even minor disapproval or criticism, they may become depressed and make impulsive decisions, including suicide.

Murder Cases Reported as Suicide

The media respondent revealed that many so-called suicides in Yasin are, in fact, murder or honor killing cases disguised as suicides. Families often refuse postmortems to conceal the truth and protect the family’s reputation. This practice skews suicide statistics and highlights the oppressive traditions faced by women.

Suicide Background in Families

A suicide history in a family can also perpetuate the problem. If a family member has previously committed suicide, it may create a precedent, making suicide seem like an acceptable solution for future generations.

Factors Shared by the SHO (Police Women Department) and Her Perspectives

Honor Killing vs. Suicide

The SHO emphasized that many honor killings in Yasin are reported as suicides to avoid legal consequences. Families often refuse postmortems, making it challenging for police to investigate these cases thoroughly.

Lack of Third-Party Support

The SHO pointed out those traditional families often pressure women to compromise in marital conflicts, leaving them feeling unsupported and hopeless. This lack of familial or third-party intervention can lead to suicide.

Illegal Relationships

Illegal relationships were also cited as a factor. When such relationships result in pregnancies, women face rejection from both partners and families, leading some to see suicide as their only option.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from the interviews reveal the deeply entrenched social and cultural challenges faced by women in Yasin, contributing to issues such as inequality, restricted autonomy, and limited opportunities. The stereotypical division of labor and male dominance perpetuate societal norms that undervalue women's roles and hinder their empowerment. Cultural taboos, strict norms, and the association of honor with women exacerbate the pressures they face, often pushing them toward despair. Furthermore, forced marriages, lack of decision-making power, domestic violence, and a lack of awareness of rights further marginalize women, leading to mental health challenges and, in extreme cases, suicide.

The interviews highlight that while education and modernity are gradually reshaping traditional norms, deep-seated cultural barriers persist. Women striving for independence or unconventional roles often face societal rejection, with devastating consequences. Issues like honor killings disguised as suicides, forced child marriages, and the concealment of domestic violence remain critical concerns. The findings emphasize the need for structural changes, including promoting gender equality, raising awareness of women's rights, and addressing cultural taboos, to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women. Only through collective efforts can the root causes of these issues be addressed to create a society that values and uplifts all its members equally.

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