



## **Socio-Cultural Challenges Faced by the Eloped Married Women: A Study of Ghizer Gilgit Baltistan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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This qualitative research examines sociocultural issues faced by eloped married women in District Ghizer, Gilgit-Baltistan, from the perspective of Liberal Feminist theory. In a patriarchal society highly embedded, women who make choices on who to marry often endure extreme social, emotional, and family repercussions. This research examines the reasons for elopement, the resulting consequences, and communication patterns between daughters and parents. Through an interpretive philosophical stance, face-to-face interviews were conducted with purposively sampled participants who had undergone elopement. Thematic analysis yielded prominent themes, such as parental control, financial hardship, strict class expectations, emotional alienation, and family communication breakdown. The results suggest that an authoritative and strict family setting particularly a failure in open communication between parents and daughters drives young women towards seeking independence through elopement. Our research underscored that marriage ought to be a free choice and not an imposition on the family. Our research supports dismantling patriarchal institutions that restrict women's agency and urges establishing an enabling, communicative, and respectful family atmosphere in which daughters have space to voice personal wishes.

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## **1.0 Introduction**

One of the most common inclinations of human beings over history has been to establish a family through a reasonably typical social arrangement of a marriage by which two or more individuals fulfill their essential needs of sexual regulation and child-bearing in the context of some specific relational setting (Abbas et al., 2025). Marriage is a universal social institution that regulates the family system, but its implications, forms, and functions differ in different cultures and societies. A close and enduring relationship between a man and a woman enables the couple to achieve a common social status and a legal right to bear children. Malinowski (1929) views marriage as a social contract for procreation and child care. Similarly, Lowie (1960) views it as a relatively stable or enduring bond between mates that regulates and satisfies human appetites. Marriage forms and kinds vary from society to society and culture to culture, where there are several types based on the number of individuals who come together and the relationship of kinship between or among them. The contribution of the marriage system is to form a social group of one kind or another, which, in either way, impacts other relational groups (Abbas et al., 2025).

The marriage traditions that prevail in different parts of the world provide a unique and traditional identity to a group or society within a shared geographical area. For the current research, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan have several discernible traditions, the most prominent of which is marriage. Similarly, eloped marriages are more frequent and common among women in the region (Rifki, 2025). Elopement, which is the phenomenon of individuals getting married without the advice or consent of their families, is a challenging overlap of individual liberty and values of socioculture. In regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, this is a highly symbolic practice with implications for the individuals involved and society. Elopement, as much as it expresses individual freedom, often leads to social isolation, family tensions, and transgressions of conventional values (Naz et al., 2025). Elopement is a deviation from cultural and familial norms in Pakistani society, particularly in conservative parts of the country such as Gilgit-Baltistan, where arranged marriages are standard practice, and elopement would be a deviation from cultural and familial traditions. This deviation can result in severe consequences, including honour violence and social exclusion. The case of Farzana Iqbal, who was stoned to death by her family for marrying someone against her family's will, indicates the level of severity of the reaction some families resort to in response to perceived dishonor. The sociocultural challenges eloped women experience in Gilgit-Baltistan is multifaceted. The women often experience stigma and discrimination that not only hurts their well-being but also their families and social standing. The conflict between old traditions and new ideals of personal freedom results in a sophisticated social terrain in which seeking individual happiness is possible at the expense of societal approval and protection (Huda & Kamal, 2025).

Scholars such as Jennifer Nedelsky, Martha Nussbaum, and Catriona Mackenzie provided the background for the theory of contextual autonomy, which has been brought to the centre of liberal feminist theory in recent years (Nussbaum, 2000). From this perspective, autonomy is more than simply having the liberty to decide (Nedelsky, 1997); it is also having the social support to practice that liberty. In this contemporary liberal feminist perspective, elopement is usually a

reaction to contextual non-autonomy, where women cannot make choices to marry due to reasons like societal coercion, cultural norms, or family coercion (Mackenzie & Scully, 2007). In such an environment, elopement is usually about reappropriating agency, and in most cases, it is contrary to the interests of one's family or institutions (Regan, 2015).

Nussbaum and other liberal feminist theorists believe that women require skills such as education, protection from assault, freedom of speech, and association to become genuinely autonomous (Nedelsky, 2009). Symbolic resistance to a patriarchal regime denying women the right to control their own lives, actions such as elopement cannot be merely romantic rebellion in their absence (Hariati et al., 2024).

Elopement challenges the authority of a system that deprives women of the right to choose, as much as it is a highly personal declaration of love (Apriani et al., 2024). The clash of traditional marriage expectations and the new aspirations of people, combined with the lack of institutional care and psychological therapy, is still pushing massive numbers of women towards desperation and self-violence (Vyas, 2022). Existing legal and social institutions, including initiatives like the Women's Police Department, have evolved, but the sociocultural causes remain unresolved. Therefore, there is a pressing need to research the sociocultural problems of women who resort to eloped marriages in Gilgit-Baltistan, especially in the district of Ghizer (Huda & Kamal, 2025). It is crucial to comprehend these lived realities for effective community engagement, policy reform, and culturally grounded mental health interventions that can safeguard the rights and lives of women in the region. The main objective of our study was to explore the sociocultural challenges married elope women face. We also explored the experiences of girls after eloping from home. The research questions of our study were:

- i. *What have been the situations that compel girls to take a life-threatening decision?*
- ii. *What are the consequences that women have to face due to inter- sect elope marriage?*

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Marriage in Pakistan is not a private matter. It is deeply rooted in a larger socio-cultural and family context. Marriage is usually arranged between families in most of the country, particularly in rural and traditional areas like Gilgit-Baltistan. It is viewed as a strategy to earn social ties, reputation, and even economic security (Ali & Gavino, 2008). Female autonomy in choosing a spouse is usually minimal. In such patriarchal environments, chastity and obedience of women are linked to the honor of the family, and transgression of gender roles can shame the whole family (Javed et al., 2024). Therefore, when women opt to elope, it is not only seen as a refusal to obey their parents but also as a transgression of cultural and moral norms. This can result in extreme repercussions, from emotional alienation to violent reprisal, particularly if elders of the community or relatives are brought into the matter (Khan & Hussain, 2021). This enforces an atmosphere of fear and repression among people, particularly young women who wish to get married according to their free will. The most serious outcome of elopement in Pakistan is the risk of honor-based violence. When a woman elopes and marries without the consent of her family, it is frequently perceived as a direct assault on the family's izzat (honor), which, according to traditional patriarchal ideology, needs to be regained sometimes through punishment or violence.

Farzana Parveen's tragic murder at the hands of her family in Lahore outside a court in 2014 is a brutal reminder of how far some will go in order to "fix" such perceived infractions (BBC News, 2014). In Gilgit-Baltistan, honor crimes cannot necessarily be public but can be private abuse, threat, forced divorce, or social ex-communication of couples. These crimes are hardly reported because of cultural taboos and fear of retribution. It is estimated, according to Human Rights Watch (2022), that hundreds of women are killed annually in Pakistan in honor of their murderers, even if many remain unreported because local authorities are in cahoots.

From a liberal feminist perspective, the gendered moral policing of women who elope is evidence of patriarchal control. Although men who get married of their own accord are usually hailed for their courage or autonomy, women are stigmatized, discredited as dishonorable women, or suspected of moral breakdown. The above double standard compounds gender inequality and punish women more severely than men for equivalent decisions men get to make (Abbas et al., 2025). Liberal feminism today disparages this moral asymmetry as a cultural tool employed for controlling women's bodies and decisions. Women who elope in Ghizer not only lose family connections but also face loss of access to education, inheritance, home, and social networks. As per liberal feminists, it is not to uphold tradition but to impose gendered obedience in the name of cultural honor (Khader, 2024). Women who elope tend to be subject to severe societal condemnation, not just from their families but from society at large.

In close-knit and religiously traditional regions such as Ghizer in Gilgit-Baltistan, where one is connected to another through tribal and communal affiliations, these women are at risk of being gossiped about, shamed, and ostracized. The stigma is also visited by the families of the girls who have eloped, with them potentially losing their social standing or being unable to find suitors for other daughters (Rahim & Fatima, 2022). The psychological implications of such social disaffiliation are significant. Women can be vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and trauma, especially if they become isolated from their natal home. Javed et al. (2024) believe that the lack of social support structures following elopement puts women in a vulnerable emotional condition, particularly if the marriage turns abusive or unstable.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

Liberal Feminism provides the grounding frame of reference for this study, and it is taken as the presumption that gender disparities are rooted in social and cultural institutional attitudes and infrastructure (Clarke, 2013). It argues that women, like men, must have complete freedom and autonomy to decide on life options, the most significant being that of a marriage partner (Khader, 2019). In much of a patriarchal society, marriage is not a decision a girl can independently make. Instead, it is arranged by family or societal convention, where girls are "married off," and boys actively "get married." This shows the passive role long provided to women, where their choices and agency are frequently curbed. In such settings, women who attempt to assert independence by choosing their husbands are socially ostracized and rejected by their families (Khader, 2024).

Liberal Feminism resists these traditional gender roles and unequal power relations in marriage (Henley, 2024). Liberal Feminism encourages marriage to be founded on respect and

equality, and it opposes the patriarchal system, which gives males greater power and authority. According to this viewpoint, a woman's autonomous choice of marriage is an important representation of her agency and logical decision-making skills (Peters, 2025). Liberal feminists support equal opportunity to benefit from such aspects as education, work, and legal protection that allow women to make life decisions (Lennon, 2025).

Furthermore, liberal Feminism recognizes that women's freedom is most often constrained by economic and social factors like poverty, gender discrimination, and tradition (Apriani et al., 2024). To this end, it supports enforcing structural changes: anti-discrimination policies, social safety nets, and gender-neutral education policies (Widyaswari et al., 2025). These are required to ensure that women are liberated and have resources to implement their rights, like the right to choose their marriage partners (Amir, 2024).

In patriarchal societies like Pakistan, women are often forced to comply with the will of male authorities by coerced or arranged marriages without autonomy (Abbas et al., 2025). In this setting, elopement is a strong form of empowerment and expression, particularly for women whose opinions are ignored (Cunliffe, 2023). However, elopement has risks, especially for women from right-wing or critical backgrounds, and typically signifies the breakdown of the more extensive system to provide women with rights in traditional marriage arrangements (Khader, 2024). From the liberal feminist perspective, the solution is not just to embrace women's right to choose their suitor but to destroy the more significant patriarchal assumptions that do not enable them to make this choice (Nedelsky, 1997). This strategy appeals to parents and society to embrace women's freedom and respect their independence to make their own choices. Encouraging such independence would reduce elopements and enhance parent-child relationships founded on trust and respect (Nussbaum, 2000). The liberal feminist framework not only helps to examine how marriage as a control device is utilized across women's lives but also encourages structural and cultural transformation to ensure gender equality and empowerment both in the private and public spheres (Khader, 2024).

### **3.0 Methodology**

Our research relies on an interpretive epistemology that underscores comprehending subjects' subjective experiences, meaning, and personal perspectives in specific sociocultural environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretivism fits our research because it allows exploration of how women who have eloped while they were married understand their lives, negotiating patriarchal normativity and community expectations about being married. The approach is a supplement to Liberal Feminist Theory that prioritizes the agentic autonomy of women contesting traditional power frameworks.

An ontological constructivist stance is taken, acknowledging that social realities such as norms about marriage, honor, and gender roles are not absolute but are socially constructed and culturally mediated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Meaning is thus co-constructed between participants and researcher, requiring qualitative, in-depth involvement.

A qualitative, exploratory design is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of eloped women. Qualitative inquiry provides flexibility, subtlety, and rich

contextual understanding as the subject matter is sensitive and under-researched in the local context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The aim is not generalization but depth and authenticity.

This research utilized purposive sampling because of the sensitive and specific nature of the research topic. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method where participants are chosen based on pre-determined criteria that relate to the research goals, not by random selection (Neuman, 2011). This approach enables the researcher to sample those with immediate experience with the phenomenon studied here. These, namely women, have eloped and experienced social or cultural problems. As Neuman (2011) describes, purposive sampling is exceptionally well suited for hard-to-reach or hidden populations where the topic is sensitive, socially stigmatized, or confidential. Elopement is often perceived as a taboo in traditional societies like that of Ghizer, where women's marital choices are subject to familial and societal control. Consequently, women who have eloped are unlikely to be easily accessible through random or probabilistic sampling methods. With purposive sampling, the researcher could choose participants purposively who met specific inclusion criteria. These women had eloped for marriage and were willing to share their experiences and opinions regarding the sociocultural challenges and results they went through. This way, the information gathered was rich, relevant, and based on actual experiences. Moreover, this sampling technique allowed the researcher to sample participants from particular socioeconomic and cultural settings, which are very important for an informed examination of how patriarchal values manifest in different social strata. As elopement could be more prevalent or perceived differently among women with specific educational, rural, or ethnic backgrounds, purposive sampling offered the leeway to preserve this diversity and complexity. It was an ethical and strategic decision in line with the research objective of giving voice to marginalized voices while working on a sensitive and culturally grounded problem. The sample size chosen was 15–20 participants, varying in age, education level, and socioeconomic status to provide multiple narratives.

The method of data collection is semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This mode enables thematic consistency while providing space for participants to tell their stories, describe feelings, and ruminate on individual experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were conducted in the local dialect or Urdu, depending on the participant's choice. Ethical concerns include confidentiality and emotional sensitivity, and informed consent was adhered to. Field notes and reflective memos were kept to capture non-verbal information and contextual comments.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process included familiarization with data (reading and rereading transcripts), initial coding (e.g., autonomy, stigma, support networks, resistance), identifying and developing themes consistent with liberal feminist ideas, and reviewing and interpreting themes in the context of theoretical and empirical literature. Particular care was taken in the use of language, metaphors, and phrasing that indicates internalized oppression or resistance stories aligned with both interpretivism and feminist qualitative approaches (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

## 4.0 Findings and Results

### 4.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Age	Age The Time Marriage	At Of dren	Chil	Education	Years Elopement	Since
26	18		3	Intermediate	8 years	
27	18		3	8th	9 years	
32	24		2	BS	8 years	
20	19		0	Intermediate	1 year	
30	21		4	BA	9 years	
25	19		2	Matric	6 years	
20	18		0	Intermediate	2 years	
32	23		2	Matric	9 years	
19	17		0	Intermediate	2 years	
23	19		2	Intermediate	5 years	
21	19		1	Intermediate	2 years	
24	20		2	Matric	4 years	

According to the above table, four of the twelve respondents were 19, three were 18, the rest were between 20 and 24, and just one was 17 when they chose to elope from home. One of the most important demographic factors of the respondents is their schooling. Six respondents had an intermediate level of education, three or four had passed matric, and one had earned her BS. Regarding the number of children, 5-6 respondents had 1-2 children, three had 3-4 children, and the other had no children. According to the data above, the respondents who eloped were primarily young, mostly aged 18 to 24. This demonstrates that they were immature and lacked support or supervision from family members or other social networks. This absence of support could have influenced their choice to elope, thinking they had no choice but to take matters into their own hands. In addition to this, most of the respondents had a mid-level education, showing that they were not in a position to continue their education because of financial or social factors. It might have influenced their decision to elope. Those without access to higher education or job opportunities might believe they have minimal options for building their future and can resort to unorthodox means like eloping. In the form of family or community pressure to fulfill certain norms or expectations, social constraint also plays a role in their decision.

## 4.2 Socioeconomic and Class Barriers as Triggers for Elopement

Marriage in patriarchal societies continues to be highly rooted in economic and class hierarchies. The choice of marrying is not entirely an affair of mutual affection but is severely tested in light of economic conditions, class similarity, and reputation. For many middle-class families, marrying daughters to financially secure men is a strategic decision for social mobility and long-term security (Banerjee, 2013). A respondent said, *"We were living a normal life, as you must know about middle-class families. My parents always wanted their children to get quality education and better jobs, and even in terms of marriage for their daughters, they always wanted a well-settled person with good earnings."* This narrative focuses on a core value system wherein economic prosperity overshadows emotional bonds in determining suitable marriage alliances. Here, love relationships between classes are seen as irresponsible or deviant, even based on love and respect. Women are frequently denied agency; their desires are pushed aside in the interest of economic sense. She explained, *"We were in love and wanted to be married, but my family was not supportive of the relationship because he came from an impoverished family."* The respondent's deposition proves that her family's opposition stemmed mainly from the suitor's low socioeconomic standing. The first thing her father was worried about was the absence of a "stable profession" in the boy, and his family's attitude towards his economic standing was spartan and humiliating. This pattern reflects the primacy of financial considerations in marriage and a deep-seated prejudice that equates poverty with moral or personal inadequacy (Waqar & Amir, 2015).

The girl's effort to demonstrate that "character is more important than money" was laughed out of court, as if in most such households, sentiments like kindness or honesty have little currency when pitted against a need for economic security. Therefore, when families deny a love relationship because of class differences, girls can be left with no choice but to decide between familial obligation and individual autonomy. Elopement, then, becomes a radical assertion of agency, a refusal to be reduced to a transaction in a class-based marriage market. For some respondents, the pressure was not just about poverty but about mismatched class expectations and lifestyle choices. As the respondent belonged to a very well-off family, the boy her parents wanted to marry should equal their financial status. She has seen privilege and money all her life, so money was just a factor in satisfying materialistic needs, but affection was a factor that was always missing in her life. In this case, emotional deprivation despite material abundance led the respondent to seek out love and validation elsewhere. The simplicity and concern of the boy contrasted with the emotionally poor but materialistically affluent home she had come from. Her statement illustrates how emotional neglect in high-income homes can be an unspoken but powerful push factor in running away. Accordingly, elopement is the only logical route to marriage, skipping fixed family criteria that postpone or rule out marriage according to material considerations. Such opposition is not solely individual but also political. It opposes the class hierarchy idea of marriages and retakes the authority to love transversely along economic divides. However, it also subjects young women to considerable social risk and stigma, primarily when they act contrary to familial authority.



### 4.3 Patriarchal Oppression and the Quest for Female Agency

The interview stories present a uniform tale of women trying to exert agency in the intensely patriarchal socio-cultural setup. The elopement and its aftereffects are neither random nor spontaneous; they are a direct outcome of structural gender disparities rooted in practices such as dowry, sectarian discrimination, and patriarchal family structures. These forces restrict women's agency and punish them for even making autonomous decisions, especially in marriage. The interviews indicate that economic pressures such as dowry and sectarian pressures are significant factors in coercing women into elopement. Refusal or inability to pay dowry often makes a woman undesirable in the eyes of potential in-laws or her family. After elopement, the lack of dowry and familial approval often results in domestic subjugation and psychological abuse. The woman is made to feel inferior compared to others and stripped of everyday decision-making power. The respondent elaborated, *"I had to ask my mother-in-law for every need because my husband told me to do that. She always taunted me whenever I asked for anything, which made me feel how much they oppressed me. They compared me to their first daughter-in-law because she received a decent dowry. Due to her good dowry and her parents' prosperous financial situation, she consistently enjoys greater respect within the family"*. These statements reveal that patriarchal norms reassert themselves even after the act of elopement. The act of rebellion (eloping) does not dismantle the social structures that oppress women. It shifts their location from parental to marital control, where the woman remains under male and elder-female authority.

In such situations, elopement emerges as the only avenue through which a woman can exercise control over her life and marriage decisions. A respondent said, *"My In-laws were already aware that our marriage was sudden and secretive."* This quotation suggests that the woman's choice was necessitated by the absence of autonomy to marry with family consent, which is one of the main principles in Liberal Feminism criticisms. In Liberal Feminism, these choices are based on institutionalized gender discrimination that restricts a woman's freedom, and thus, elopement is a revolutionary but necessary claim of autonomy. Once they elope, the absence of dowry and family consent commonly leads to domestic servitude and emotional abuse. The woman feels inferior to others and deprived of day-to-day decision-making authority. Liberal feminism promotes equal access to legal protection, education, and economic opportunities so that women are not relegated to life-defining choices (Khader, 2019; Henley, 2024). Liberal feminism holds the view that a change in structures is necessary and not merely individual choices. Here, while elopement can seem an empowering act, it is still constrained by the unaltered patriarchal situation, which needs to be reformed and dismantled by liberal feminism.

### 4.4 Male Authority and Family Repression

The interviews reveal a strong undertone of patriarchal domination, with male authority figures serving as gatekeepers, influencing every area of a woman's life, including choices about marriage and migration. The respondents shared consistent patterns of living in fear of male family members, including fathers and brothers, who function as guardians of honor and enforcers of control. This systemic suppression often leaves women with no choice but to elope as an act of

resistance and self-preservation. A respondent narrated: *“My family, especially my brothers, responded with such hatred when I told them about my relationship with (Noman). We were in love and wanted to be married. However, my family was not supportive of the relationship”. “When I tried to tell my mother separately, she advised me to close my mouth and change my mind because that would kill me overnight, and no one would know what happened to us. Moreover, they will not let me until the Day of Judgment if I try to dissident. Do you know anything about the men in your family? They will eat you alive”*. This story illustrates the long-standing patriarchal systems restricting women's agency, particularly in decision-making about marriage. In the interviewee's life, the resistance faced by her family, more so by her brothers, illustrates how women's dating lives are not theirs but subject to men's control.

Liberal Feminism argues that women, just like men, need to be free to choose their spouse without societal or family intervention. The aggressiveness encountered by the lady upon making her declaration of love for Noman identifies the social and emotional price of going against patriarchal expectations. The threat by the mother to "close my mouth" and the violence, in case the woman continues to be adamant, highlights the intense dominance men exercise within such institutions. The woman's terror of revenge being metaphorically "eaten alive" by men in her family shows the absence of agency women feel when they assert independence. This coercion, which usually comes with threats of violence, shows that patriarchy exists and is perpetuated by fear and violence. From a Liberal Feminist point of view, this is an important issue since it denies women the right to make their own choices independently without the ever-present threat of violence or coercion. Liberal Feminists such as Nussbaum (2000) stresses the importance of creating a societal framework where women are empowered to make life decisions without fearing retaliation.

The fear of the woman disobeying her family and suffering severe repercussions underscores the need for cultural and structural changes that allow women to make choices based on their values and preferences rather than conforming to rigid patriarchal expectations. The violence, coercion, and emotional manipulation to which the woman is subjected underscore the imperative need for change in society. Liberal Feminism promotes structural reforms sensitive to such issues, emphasizing gender equality and women empowerment that would make them free to make life choices without fear and force. Women's Empowerment, through equal opportunity and abolition of patriarchal relationships, remains at the core of a fair and just society (Amir, 2024).

#### **4.5 Caste-Based Discrimination and Social Stratification**

Caste is a deeply rooted social construct that discriminates deliberately against some communities, particularly in South Asian civilizations such as India and Pakistan. It is an identifying identifier and the basis for prejudice, stereotyping, and social contempt (Zubia, 2022). One respondent described how her marriage proposal was rejected solely because her partner belonged to a lower caste and a poorer background. *“When we decided to get married, his parents came with a marriage proposal, but my father refused because he came from a poor background and he is from a lower sect. I do not consider lower castes a big matter because many people*

*neglect love and happiness. I tried to convince my family with many facts that I would be happy with him in any condition... but it was futile. They declined it completely.*” Despite her repeated attempts and willingness to take full responsibility for her choice, her father’s caste-based prejudice overruled any other consideration.

This is consistent with Sahebrao (2022), who noted that inter-caste marriages continue to be stigmatized in rural areas despite urban acceptance over time. Although societal modernization has brought some change, caste-based rigidity continues in traditional families. Another respondent shared similar views: *“There was no objection regarding my marriage with Hasan except my father. As you know, the caste system is normally practiced in rural areas; just because Hasan belonged to a lower caste, my father was strictly against our wedding.”*

Her heartbreak reveals the emotional cost borne by individuals who challenge caste norms. She shared: *“I tried to tell my parents about the marriage, and they asked first about the boy’s caste. I told them he is from a lower caste, but I do not have an issue with it. Their response was acrimonious; that broke my heart. They told me they would kill me but would not allow me to get married to that person.”* These deeply embedded attitudes have a profound psychological impact and reflect a contradiction between education and social progress. She lamented: *“I do not know why people get an education if they cannot change their mindset for their children.”*

This contradiction supports the argument by Saima and Iqra (2022), who argue that caste-based restrictions during marriage persist even when religious teachings and Islamic law explicitly prohibit such discrimination. Liberal Feminism, which emphasizes individual freedom and equal opportunity, is particularly relevant here. It argues that all individuals regardless of caste, gender, or class should have the right to choose their life partner. Khader (2019) contends that when institutions and families impose rigid norms based on caste or class, they strip individuals of their autonomy. The respondents’ narratives also reflect Martha Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities approach, which states that every individual must be enabled to live the life they value. Systemic denial of such agency based on caste prejudices constitutes a direct contravention of these liberal ideals.

Another key discernment from the data is the irony that religious justifications are used both to support and to deny inter-caste marriages. One participant strongly criticized this selective reasoning, stating: *“In the holy scriptures, it is written that Allah has divided people so that they will identify with each other, not to set standards of inferiority and superiority. In every matter, they will bring Islam, but when it comes to marriage, they do not look up to the rights given in our religion.”* She argued, *“If parents start to understand and help their children, there would not be so many cases of these marriages in the future.”*

She noted, *“If they are pointing to someone’s financial condition, I think people change, conditions change. If a person is hard working, he will make money after some time, but at least, he should consider his children’s choices.”* Her reflections highlight how children may become resentful, frustrated, and even rebellious when parents make decisions for them without considering their desires. She concluded: *“Children may turn to drastic strategies like elopement*

*when they are not free to make their own life decisions.”*

This supports Clarke’s (2013) view that social constructs like caste are maintained through ideology and strict control within the family. In addition, Mahnoor (2022) observes that inter-caste proposals are usually rejected even when Islamic approval is given, showing that cultural biases tend to prevail over religious teachings. Some families even compel daughters to stay unmarried instead of sacrificing caste status, valuing social reputation over individual happiness. The struggle of these respondents highlights the urgent need for societal reform that aligns with liberal values of freedom, equality, and self-determination.

#### **4.6 Elopement as a Response to Inaccessible Communication Channels**

Communication is the basis of intra-personal and inter-personal relationships and identification in families. Communication in families with high conformity orientation tends to be one-way, where the children are bound to obey their parents without expressing their feelings, inclinations, or opposition. The communication gap emerges particularly when young women make personal decisions such as love and marriage. The narrative of one respondent, *“We both liked each other but did not dare to tell our parents...”* illustrates that fear, emotional distance, and authoritarian parenting foster secrecy and emotional withdrawal.

The respondent mirrors a home environment with emotional distance and rigidity, specifically with the father. She indicates that she never had an open conversation with her father, mirroring Marshall’s (2017) research findings that strict home environments change the tone, frequency, and content of parent-adolescent communication. In such homes, daughters often grow up internalizing fear rather than trust, resulting in a lack of emotional safety to express personal decisions such as romantic involvement. *“I cannot recall the last time I spoke with my father... Parents only know how to order, and children must comply.”* Such dynamics produce anxious silence, where daughters are conditioned to suppress their voices, leading to misinterpretations, emotional detachment, and ultimately, unilateral decision-making such as elopement.

The decision to elope often emerges not from a lack of love or respect for one’s family but from a perceived lack of communicative space to assert one’s autonomy. The respondents predicted adverse outcomes such as rejection, disrespect, or punishment if they dared to share their feelings. *“She already forecasts they will never respect their decision to love marriage, especially at a young age...”* The anticipation of parental disapproval, especially in matters of love and agency, illustrates how communication gaps drive covert resistance. When daughters find their voices silenced within their primary social unit, they look outward to friends, partners, or themselves for validation, support, and action. Intergenerational and cultural dissonance further widen the communication gap, where traditional norms such as arranged marriages conflict with modern ideals of individual choice. Daughters in these contexts face dual pressures to conform to cultural values and assert their emotional independence. *“As brown people have less trend of being informal with their children for centuries...”* This cultural tendency toward emotional reserve between parents and children contributes to affective alienation, where parents, despite good intentions, remain emotionally inaccessible. As a result, daughters become invisible, unsupported,

and voiceless and tend to take drastic measures to reclaim autonomy. Once communication is severed or restricted, misunderstandings run rampant. Parents will likely resort to disobedience, whereas daughters are certain that they have been neglected or oppressed. She further stated, "*They never even know what their daughters want in life...*" This disaffection represents the breakdown of relationship empathy, in which both members live according to different expectations, implicit norms, and suppressed emotions. Such families are vulnerable to emotional fragmentation without communication as an intervening mechanism.

## 5.0 Discussion

This research has discussed the socio-cultural issues of eloped married women in District Ghizer, Gilgit-Baltistan, focusing particularly on parents' and daughters' communication gap, gendered expectations, economic deprivation, and social exclusion. These all are intertwined with the underlying assumptions of Liberal Feminism, which forms the theoretical lens through which these findings can be analyzed. In patriarchal societies, as evidenced in the respondent accounts, daughters are commanded to obey rather than to take part in interactive discourse with their parents. Liberal Feminism counters this by positing that women, like men, are rational agents and must be accorded equal involvement in decisions regarding their lives (Henley, 2024). The communication deficit in such families is not just an individual shortcoming but a structural problem based on hierarchical gender roles, which need to be deconstructed to enable mutual respect and understanding (Clarke, 2013).

Several respondents explained elopement as not a spontaneous act of rebellion but rather a conscious act of independence in a situation where their will and voice were perpetually being suppressed. From a Liberal Feminist point of view, such an act is highly symbolic of women regaining their right to choose, a right that has long been withheld in patriarchal societies (Peters, 2025). As Khader (2024) points out, patriarchal societies tend to construct marriage as something being done to women and not by them. Respondents' uncover financial dependence on family and its attendant implication of obedience, particularly if parents were able to exert financial control over granting or withholding marital approval. As Amir (2024) postulates, absolute autonomy necessitates freedom from control and freedom to act which can only be achieved when women are empowered socially and economically. Liberal Feminists promote access to education, labor equity, and social welfare systems as tools in this direction.

The results also showed how eloped women experience social repercussions, such as rejection by family, stigmatization, and loss of reputation. This corroborates Khader's (2024) statement that patriarchal societies discipline and punish women who are outside the normative roles, particularly in issues of love and marriage. Liberal Feminism criticizes cultural sanctions as social control mechanisms that work to maintain male dominance and female subordination. According to Nedelsky (1997), structural and cultural changes need to take place side by side to enable individual autonomy to thrive. Social ostracism of women who elope is, therefore, not a personal issue but a public manifestation of a system of gender inequality calling for societal change. Respondents' experiences show that if families adjusted to accommodative dialogue and appreciated women's agency, elopement would be unnecessary. By creating an open communication environment and ensuring daughters' experience of parity of decision-making

powers, families could avert the disintegration of relations and infringements in respect and trust.

In the Liberal Feminist theory context, the narratives of eloped women in District Ghizer affirm the need for structural and cultural transformation. Elopement among these women is not a challenge to authority but a fight against dependency in a society that denies female agency on the pretext of tradition. The elopement, while risky, is an act of defiance, a recourse when institutional or familial support does not exist. To produce meaningful change, there needs to be an effort to eradicate patriarchal assumptions in family structures, encourage open communication, offer equal educational and economic opportunities, and redefine marriage as a partnership of equals rather than a transaction of control.

### **5.1 Conclusion**

Focusing on comprehending their goals, experiences, and the structural elements that impact their life, our study investigated the socio-cultural challenges encountered by eloped married women in District Ghizer, Gilgit-Baltistan. Our findings identify a lack of communication between daughters and their families, emotional neglect, coercion over arranged marriage decisions, and restrictive gender norms as some of the key factors. Respondents experienced silencing in their families and could not voice their wishes or fears. Elopement, therefore, presented itself not as an impulsive act but as a calculated expression of autonomy when all other options for self-determination were blocked. From a Liberal Feminist view, this is a reaction against structural inequality, whereby the ability to choose one's marriage partner is restricted by patriarchal control. After elopement, women undergo extreme social marginalization, disownment by their natal families, poverty, and branding in their neighborhoods. Most interviewees indicated they were branded dishonorable or immoral, hence long-term mental and emotional distress. These reactions demonstrate how patriarchal culture implements social punishment as a means to enforce female compliance. Liberal Feminism contends that such sanctions are not neutral but are meant to maintain male control over women's behaviors and options. Institutional and cultural change is needed to solve the genesis of these challenges. Encouraging open dialogue between families, gender-equitable education, and support systems among women who self-select their partners can avoid the necessity for elopement and improve healthy parent-child relations. Finally, our study prompts a reconsideration of customary impediments to women's autonomy and urges a country where women's rights to dignity, choice, and love are completely honored.

### **5.2 Limitations of the Study**

District Ghizer in Gilgit-Baltistan was the only focus of the investigation. While the location may have distinct socio-cultural dynamics, the findings may not represent eloped women across Pakistan from other religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. The study included a small group of eloped women and used a purposive sampling approach. This enabled extensive, comprehensive descriptions, but the sample was limited in terms of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and education degree. The narratives of the women were the primary emphasis of this research. The study and overall picture of the problem were enhanced by excluding the viewpoints of parents, community members, and spouses.

### **5.3 Future Suggestions**

Future studies should expand to other regions of Pakistan or South Asia to explore how cultural, ethnic, and religious contexts influence the phenomenon of elopement and female autonomy. The following research should include parents, community elders, spouses, and religious figures to understand the broader social ecology surrounding elopement and marriage norms. Conducting long-term follow-ups with eloped couples could provide deeper insight into how their social standing, emotional well-being, and relationships evolve. Future studies could also assess the effectiveness of current legal protections and support services available for women who choose love marriages or elopement and how these can be improved to align with feminist principles of autonomy and equality.

**Anila Atiq:** Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

**Dhanak Zafar:** Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

**Huma Butt:** Methodology and Revision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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