

Marital Conflict Management And Normative Orientation Of Spouses And Their Family Reconciliators

Dr.Tayyaba Sohail¹, Ms. Kiran Ikram², Dr. Gull-i-Hina³,
Dr. Asma Seemi Malik⁴, Amna Ilyas⁵

¹Assitant Professor, Department of Sociology and Gender Studies, UHE
(S.tayyaba@gmail.com)

²Lecturer Sociology, LCWU (Correspondence)
(kkiranmalikk@gmail.com)

³Assistant Professor History, LCWU
(gul.hina@lcwu.edu.pk)

⁴Assistant Professor Sociology, LCWU.

⁵Ex M. Phil research scholar University of Sargodha.
Amnailyas233@gmail.com

Abstract

The study intends to understand the normative orientation of spouses and reconciliators while managing marital conflicts in the urban settings of Lahore. It is vital to understand that normative orientations of society not just guide the marital interactions of the spouses, but they might also be vitally influencing the reconciliators while opting for conflict resolution strategies from negotiation, accommodation or confrontation. Such understanding will be helpful to have in-depth insight into the processes of marital interactions specific to the reconciliation process of marriages within the gender dynamics of society as the role of spouses is placed within the framework of gender-accepted roles and responsibilities. The study was conducted using qualitative research paradigm. 20 couples and 10 reconciliators were recruited in the study using purposive and theoretical sampling, respectively. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using British Sociological Association guidelines of ethics. The findings suggest that the patriarchal norms of segregating male and female roles in public spaces and private spaces respectively dominated in defining marital

interaction of the spouses. Reconciliators are found to be using all vital strategies of providing confidential vent, providing possible amicable solutions and restoring the trust of both parties.

Keywords: Normative Orientations, Marital Interaction, Gender, Reconciliation, Marital Conflict Management.

Introduction

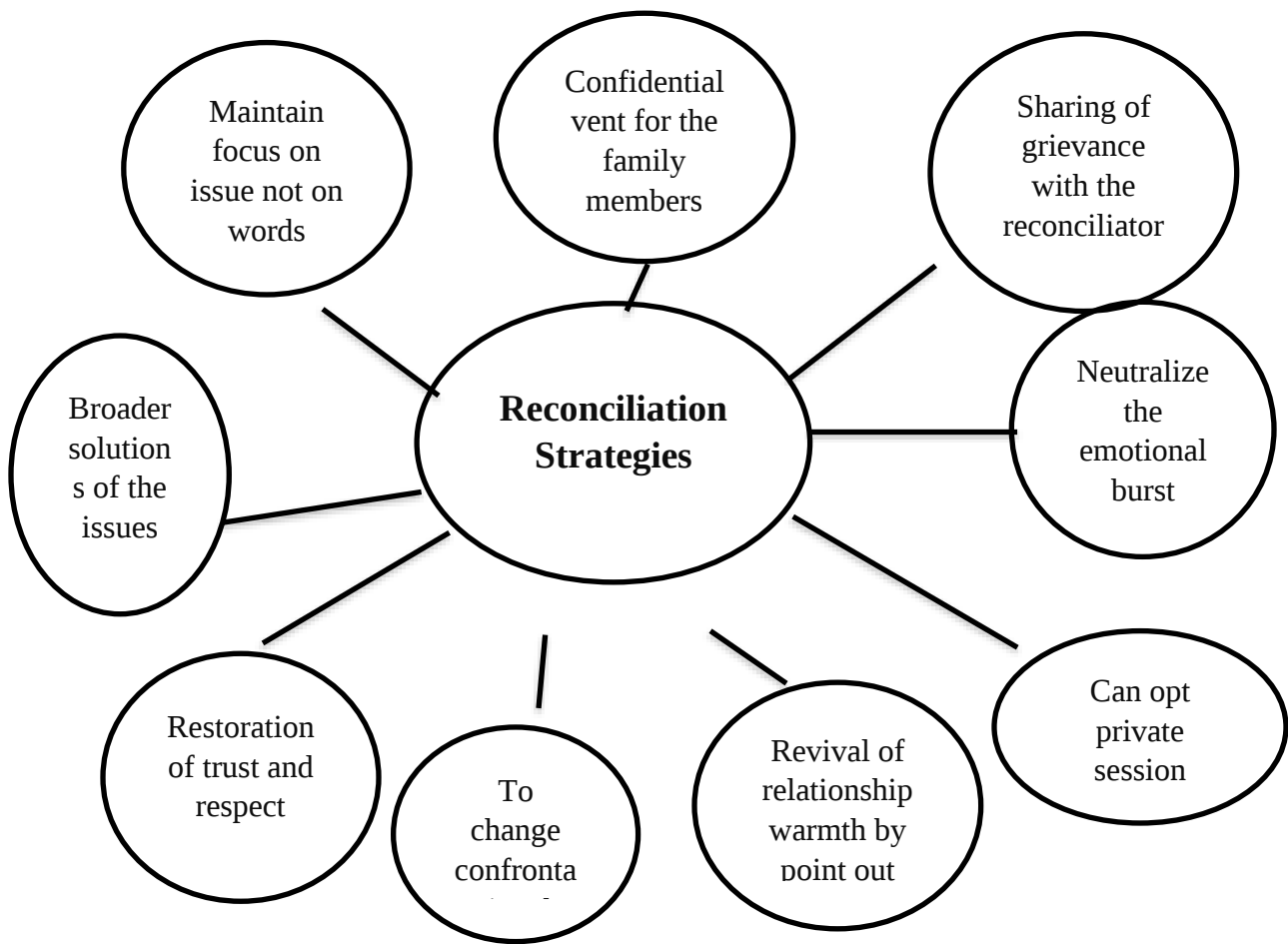
Marriage is one of the oldest and most vital of the existing relational arrangements. Marriage has based its foundation on love, care, support, and companionship (Hart, 2007). A successful marriage requires a quality relationship between both spouses with a smooth marital interaction to fulfill the expectations attached with the it. However, in marital arrangements, spouses may face difficulties in the relationships due to difference of opinion. These opinion differences can be sorted through discussions which may strengthen the relationship further (Asadi et al., 2016). But in some cases, it may affect the relationship to a level where the spouses may need the help of a third party to reconcile and resolve the conflicting issues. In developed countries, the concept of marriage counselors is very acceptable; however, in developing countries, there is no such formal institution (Farnam et al., 2011). A rather close family and friends play the role of reconciliators in case of any unsorted problem caused among the couples. It is vital to understand that normative orientations of society not just to guide the marital interactions of the spouses, but they might also be vitally influencing the reconciliators while opting for conflict resolution strategies from negotiation, accommodation or confrontation. Such understanding will be helpful to have in-depth insight into the processes of marital interactions specific to the reconciliation process of marriages within the gender dynamics of society. The gender orientation of the society defines the actions, interactions and marital adjustments of the spouses (Brickell, 2006). The study seeks to explore the normative orientation of spouses and reconciliators while managing marital conflicts in Lahore.

In a traditional society like Pakistan, marriages are not just an arrangement between couples. They are arranged, maintained and owned as a relationship between two different families (McDonald, 1981). Therefore, married spouses, along with children, prefer to live in the house of the parents (Widmer et al., 2010), symbolically showing the acceptance of societal norms of an ideal family type in a marital organization. This depicts that marriage is considered a mere addition of a person in the existing family system which does not require a separate house because it can weaken the family bond. Being patriarchal, males have been considered bread earners and heads of the family. The gendered socialization of a male child is based on the principle of taking care of parents at an older age in exchange for the love, care and sacrifices they made for him during his early life. Deviance from this norm is stigmatized in society and challenges the position of men in the spaces of hegemonic masculinity (Milardo, & Lewis, 1985; Connell, 1995). In an attempt to align with the norm of taking care of their natal family, male spouses undermine and limit their role to fulfilling the monetary needs of their spouses and ignore their responsibility of being compassionate towards their spouses (Chauhan, 2014). Furthermore, they pressurize their wives by demanding extra vigilance towards their parents. They expect their spouses to qualify as the best daughter-in-law in order to be recognized as good wives. Marital roles and spousal responsibilities of spouses are defined by this mutual understanding (Blackstone, 2003). Spouses attempt to be aligned with their role expectations to avoid social sanctions (Scott, 2006; Widmer, Constantin, & Carminati, 2010), including being ridiculed, labelling as a coward, impotent and subordinate of wife. To avoid the sanction, male spouses chose living in a joint family system while ignoring the demand of the nuclear family set-up of their spouses (Cherlin, 2004). On one hand, living in a joint family system remains the bone of contention, and on the other hand, they may be influential in sorting the problems of spouses. Their active role in the lives of married couples cannot be ignored throughout the marital life cycle (Felmlee & Faris, 2013).

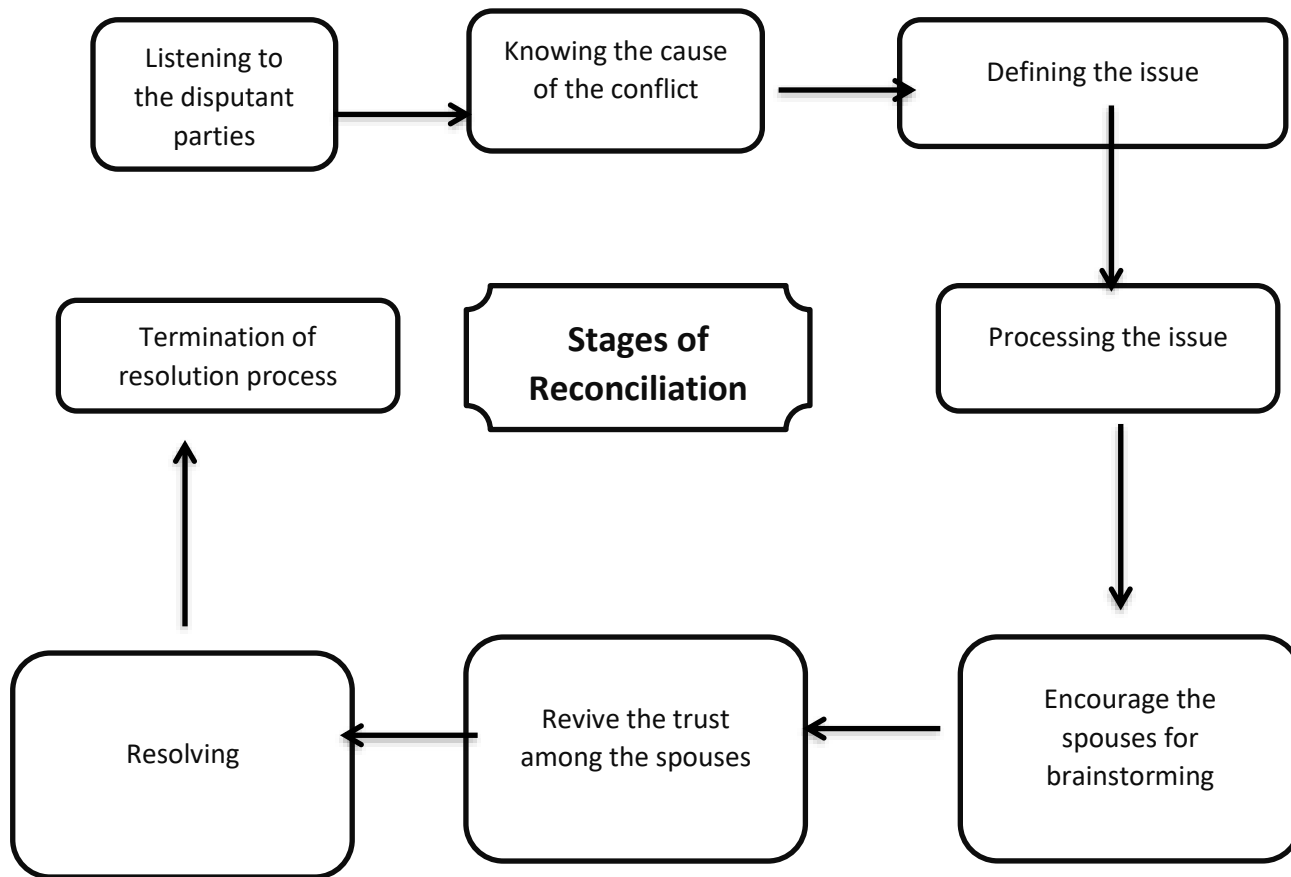
Reconciliation strategy and reconciliation stages

Multiple conflict resolution techniques can be used by the reconciliators to resolve conflict among couples. The choice of reconciliators by the couples are made because of their comfort level with the reconciliators, trust upon their suggestions and being at the power position among other network members. Therefore, they are usually reconciliators found to be the elder one, the family head or close kin member.

According to Bogacz (2020), by handling the enmity of the disputing spouses, the reconciliators might give the family members a confidential outlet to express their grievances. The reconciliators are available for the spouses to discuss their grievances with; in turn, the reconciliators can substitute a spouse's harsh words with words of high emotional intensity when communicating these grievances to the other side. They continue to pay attention to the problems rather than the words or the persons. They temper the partners' emotional outburst. A key tactic of the reconciliators is to break deadlocks by offering more comprehensive answers to the problems. They can provide the disputants options and turn a hostile environment into one that is cooperative and conducive to negotiation and peacemaking. The reconciliators also choose to have separate secluded sessions with the spouses to make them understand the seriousness of the problem and the repercussions of their decisions on themselves and for their families. The final and most crucial tactic of the reconciliators is to reestablish the couples' mutual respect and trust. They make an effort to draw attention to the challenging moments that spouses experienced and conquered due their mutual bond. In an effort to rekindle the warmth of their connection, they also make an effort to highlight the amicable aspects of their marriage.



According to Payne (1999), setting the stage for reconciliation entails listening to the parties involved in the dispute and establishing the understanding about the causes of the conflict. The later steps include; framing the problem, and during this phase, the reconciliator assess the actual desires and difficulties of the spouses and their condition to agree and disagree with the demand. Processing the problem is the third phase. Reconciliators encourage partners to discuss potential solutions for reconciliation at this point. They work to rebuild trust between couples so that the conversation between them and the appropriate family members can begin. The resolving stage comes last. The spouses have looked into every option for resolving their dispute at this point. They either concur with the condition fully or partially. The resolution process ends if they refuse to accept any of the proposed solutions.



METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design

Interpretive research paradigm was used for the current study to align with qualitative research design considering its importance in the study of human experiences, emotions, relationships and functioning of the organization (Denzin, 1989; Rahman, 2017); with the outcomes of multiple realities in context to a particular phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The design will be helpful in understanding, elaborating and exploring the subjective nature of the study (Mason, 2017, Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) with a deep understanding (Maxwell, 2012) of individual realities and experiences regarding the utilization of normative orientation of reconciliators in resolving the conflict of spouses and shaping their marital interaction.

Purposive sampling technique with a homogenous sampling method was used to recruit 10 married couples. The inclusion criterion of participants includes:

1. Married for five years or more
2. Having at least one child
3. Living in a joint family system
4. Willingness to share experiences

Considering the objective of current research and the inclusion criterion of the study, nuclear families, childless couples and newly married couples were excluded. The reconciliators were identified using theoretical sampling and were also interviewed to get the holistic and deeper insight of the phenomenon. Semi-Structured interview guide was the tool for data collection and in-depth interviews were conducted from the recruited participants. Two separate interview guides were prepared; one for couples and second was for reconciliators by using the inductive and deductive codes with the help of existing literature. The interview guide of couples was designed in 4 sections. The first section comprised of socio-demographic information. The second section was to have information about their daily routines. This section was relevant to develop an understanding of their role expectations and role performances. The third section was about their marital conflicts and how reconciliators guided. The last part of the interview guide was about recommendations and suggestions from the participants. The interview guide of the reconciliators was also divided into four sections. First section was about the socio-demographic information of the reconciliators. The second section was about their beliefs about gender roles which are vital to understand their normative orientation about the marital roles of the spouses. The third section was about the conflict resolution adopted by them to resolve the conflict of the couples. Finally, the last section was about the recommendations and closure of the interview.

The British Sociological Association's standards, which guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, were followed during the interview. All participants gave their verbal agreement after being informed of their freedom to withdraw and stop participating in the research at any time.

Given that some of the participants had a language barrier, the interviews were performed bilingually in both Urdu and English. Digitally recorded interviews were afterwards converted into verbatim transcripts. After then, the transcripts were converted into English. After stages of open axial, and selective coding, data were coded inductively and deductively and categorised. Themes were generated. The conclusion was reached using thematic analysis, a purely qualitative method.

Findings

The socio demographic attributes of the research participants are as below:

Couples	Gender	Age	Employment Status
1	Male	38	Government Job
	Female	31	House Wife
2	Male	35	Private Job
	Female	32	House Wife
3	Male	29	Private Job
	Female	27	House Wife
4	Male	42	Government Job
	Female	33	Private Job
5	Male	39	Private Job
	Female	29	House Wife
6	Male	38	Private Job
	Female	33	House Wife
7	Male	34	Private Job
	Female	33	House Wife
8	Male	37	Private Job
	Female	35	Government Job
9	Male	44	Private Job
	Female	39	House Wife
10	Male	36	Private Job
	Female	29	Private Job

Reconiliators		
Gender	Age	Relationship with spouses
Male	55	Paternal uncle of Male Spouse
Male	59	Maternal Uncle of Male Spouse
Male	62	Paternal Uncle of Female Spouse

Male	50	Maternal Spouse	Uncle of Female
Male	55	Paternal Uncle of Female Spouse	

Role of Spouses

The marital role expectation of society from the spouses influences their marital role performance and defines the sanctions (rewards or punishments) accordingly. The findings suggest a clear demarcation of marital roles between the private and public domains. The private domain belongs to female spouses, and the public domain belongs to male spouses. The female spouses are expected to take care of domestic households and caretaking of families (children, husband and in-laws). Whereas, fulfilling the monetary needs belongs to male spouses. Working women are considered to be extending their domain and ignoring their designated homemakers' roles and responsibilities.

The data showed that all participants including spouses and reconciliators agreed that the key responsibility of the male spouse is earning whereas females are responsible for all domestic nature tasks (Charlebois, 2010).

Normative Orientation of Spouses: Role Expectations and Role Performance Domestic Chores:

The role expectation of women as homemakers is reflected during the match-making process. The woman is supposed to have a complete understanding of all domestic tasks regardless of her education and employment status. As reported by a female spouse:

“When my in-laws came to meet me for the first time before marriage, my mother-in-law asked categorically about my cooking skills. She said that they are not concerned about my grades. They will consider me bright and successful, if I can cook tasty foods.”

Another female spouse reported that

“My mother always paid extra attention towards my cooking skills as she always told me that ‘mard k dil ka rasta

pait se ho ke jata ha (one can have access to her husband's heart if she is a good cook)."

This shows that the focus of families while socializing a girl remains on inculcating the skills and capabilities that are related to private domains. The same norms are reinforced during the mate-seeking process by families. This establishes the role expectations of families from female spouses. On the contrary, male spouse reported as:

"People have never asked about my nature or my personality during proposal seeking process. They always asked about my monthly earning. So now if I am just focusing on my job and not paying much attention at home, why my wife and her family is complaining about my absence from home?"

Another female spouse reported as:

"At the time of my proposal, I asked my mother to assure me about the nature of the boy and his family. But mother told me that mardon ke shaklain or lehjay nahe kamae dekhe jate ha (male earning is more important than his face and communication skills)"

This shows that the earnings of males are a significant factor when deciding on a proposal. Most women are not earning themselves. Therefore, parents predict the prosperity of their daughters with the financial status of spouses.

After marriage, couples are expected to be binding with their marital role expectations and they are evaluated from the natal family of their spouses especially the women (Ikram, Usman, 2022). Mother-in-laws are the most significant evaluators of their daughters-in-law's role performance. She not just assigned her tasks but also expected procedural conformity in completing the designated tasks. The mother-in-law's approval may further her acceptance as a valuable member of the family and a loyal companion of the husband. As reported by the female spouse:

“I feel that I am just a robot in the family and my inventor is my mother-in-law. I am not supposed to do anything of my own choice. I have to follow all her instructions. My husband will be angry with me if I failed to keep his mother happy”.

A male spouse reported as:

“My mother is an experienced lady. She has always managed all domestic tasks very successfully. So I believe that my wife should take guidance from her. She should be following our family norms, ignoring what she used to do at her natal family. But she always makes issues out of this and fights with me. I always made her clear that she should keep my mother happy if she wants me to be happy with her”.

This shows that the marital interaction of spouses is not the result of their personal interaction only. In-laws, specifically a relationship with mothers-in-law, are vital in defining and shaping the spousal relationship. Mothers-in-law use their monitoring of household activities as a control tool for their daughters-in-law by exerting power directly and indirectly (through his son) to create subordination of female spouses (Woolley, & Greif, 2019).

The role expectation of women was supported by 16 out of 20 respondents as the failure in complying with expected domestic tasks were resulted in massive fights. As reported by the male spouse:

“Despite telling my wife many times about the norms of our family, she could not meet them. Rather she started quarreling with my family and blamed me of being irresponsible towards my spousal duties. I got so upset with daily disturbances that I asked my wife to leave my house and stay at her parents.”

The same was reported by the female respondents as:

“I tried everything to keep my in-laws happy but they never feel happy. They always highlight my mistakes as my incompetency. They poisoned my husband to the level that he started believing that we cannot live together and I am his enemy. He even asked me to leave his house due to his sisters.”

This shows that spouses conforming to the normative orientation along with the family of male spouse is vital for the smooth functioning of marital relationship (Lim,1997). The role of female spouses is not limited to the domestic chore management rather taking care of in-laws including; prioritizing parents-in-laws needs (feeding, providing company and timely medication), living in a joint family and creating hospitable environment with siblings-in-laws and fulfilling the needs of husband and kids.

The traditional set-up of Pakistani society discourages nuclear family system. Children are considered the investment for older age. Males also consider that taking care of older parents is their prime responsibility which by default their wives have to share. Females feel burdened with these extensive care giving responsibilities of living in a joint family system and taking care of parents-in-law (Bulanda, 2011). The spouses' interpersonal relationship is contingent to the vigilance of wives in taking care of husband's natal family. One of the male participant reported; "My family's satisfaction towards my wife is necessary. My wife can only attain importance in my life if my family respect her". However, female spouses found this belittling for them and reported as:

"I am at the last in the list of relations of my husband. His family is everything to him. He can leave me but not his family. He is blind in their love that he never felt that his family doesn't like me and always empsons him against me."

The pull of loyalties of male spouses (Silverstein, 1992) are towards their families of origin which creates a rift between spouses and allow the family of male spouses to show dominance over female spouses and control them. In addition to taking care of families, females are considered to fulfil the needs of their husbands and comfort them. As reported by male spouse:

"Taking care of their husbands' needs and comforts is a women's responsibility. I wanted that when I return home

my wife gives me special attention and we should have exclusive time. On the contrary, on my return, I always found her in the kitchen. All tasks should be completed before my arrival”.

Whereas female spouses expressed that they are burdened with their role expectations as:

“I am a single person with a long list of demands of my husband and his family. It is inevitable for me to take care of him and his family at the same point of time”.

A clear understanding was found among all spouses that males control public domains and earning is the sole responsibility of male members. Women’s earnings are not acknowledged rather they are considered her own decisions which cannot be a value addition for family-related matters. Male as bread earners became dominant and expected that women should be managing all the domestic tasks and family care-related matters in return of his efforts to fulfil the economic needs of his family. As stated by the male respondent:

“I am earning for my wife and my family. She should be managing all domestic chores effectively so I could have a relaxing and careful home while coming back from my work.”

The role expectations of domestic chores are found to be burdened for spouses, leading to conflicts and confrontation among spouses. It was found to be exaggerating to the level that it sometimes requires the involvement of third-party as reconciliators. The normative orientation of the reconciliator is vital as it provide the lense with which marital conflicts would be viewed, issues would be negotiated, a person would be blamed, and a resolution will be presented.

Reconciliators’ understanding about spousal roles

The respondents found the presence of reconciliators vital in resolving their conflicts. It was also observed that reconciliators used their expertise and power to achieve

favourable outcomes in a disagreement that are acceptable for both parties. As reported by the reconciliator of a male spouse, "I made an effort to listen to both parties in order to find a solution that would be acceptable to both. I can identify who is wrong but blaming is not the solution". The reconciliators were discovered to be impartial and working to find a solution. They, therefore, tried to find a compromise that would satisfy both parties rather than favouring one over the other. However, their proposed solutions were found to be influenced by their own normative orientations.

It was discovered that reconciliators' views on the roles of spouses are very distinct and clear, with women being expected to handle domestic responsibilities and men being expected to handle financial matters for the family. These views are in line with the more general gender norms of Pakistan's patriarchal society. It is believed that women should have their focus on the domestic chore. They should not compromise their married life for earning small amount of money. If her employment is found to be interfering with her home obligations and her spouse is making her job a conflict for their relationship, she should resign and focus on her primary responsibilities. A reconciliator of female spouse explained:

"It's my own belief that a girl can work outside the home if she is perfectly performing the responsibilities of the home. Hence, they should not persist at the cost of their family so if the husband is not happy, a girl should quit her job. Her focus should be her marriage. *Khali suki naukri sir pe marni ha. Aurat ki hukmuran us kay ghar me he hain ha agar wohi nahi to job money bekar ha* (what she will do with earning if she has to leave the house? A real woman should be ruling her house)".

Continuation of the Marriage

The continuation of a marriage is found to be the prime normative orientation and they are found to be believing that marriage should be maintained in every possible manner. The continuance of marriage was seen to be crucial because marital protection would result in kids' protection. It was particularly significant since divorce was the only halal act that was deemed undesirable by Muslims. Divorce was

found to be equally stigmatized for the families of both spouses. Companionship of male spouses are considered vital for the respect of female spouses. Whereas the role of women in male life cannot be ignored because males can never take the role of women as mother and wife. They need help of wives in their lives. so it was also crucial for the male that this relationship continue. According to a male spouse reconciliator:

“People consider that a conflict and broken marriage is only stigma for females but it also equally difficult for males. In mutual fights, people usually neglect the prime effects of these conflicts lie on their kids. Step-mother or step-father cannot take care of the kids as their own parents can. We should not ignore the most important effectees of these conflict and those are the kids”

The findings indicate the presence of patriarchal gender norms, which found the female role to subordinate to males and primarily take care of domestic chores. The income generation role can be compromised by leaving a job but not the family responsibilities. Moreover, the presence of male is vital for female to achieve a respectable status in society. On the contrary, female companionship for males was found to be limited in her domestic roles.

Tactics of Reconciliation

The family summoned the mediators and explained the whole scenario. The reconciliators employed prudence and deliberation to come to a peaceful conclusion at this stage. It was noted that reconciliators did not reveal the grievances of one side to the other in their efforts to reach a resolution. They were aware and tempered one party's arguments while conversing with the other to create an atmosphere conducive to settlement. According to a male spouse reconciliator:

“She urged me to tell my nephew what she was feeling, but I refrained and tried to be more diplomatic. I did tell him what she meant, but I didn't use her exact words because doing so might have made things worse and prevented any chance of reconciliation.”

During the research, it was also discovered that the reconciliators thought that the male spouse's family was in a position of power and that they were utilizing their dominance to demonstrate an unfair and unwanted attitude and were more in unfair demands at times. According to the reconciliator from the female spouse:

“They were initially disrespectful and aggressive. Being the son's parents, they were showing dominance. They said that your daughter has not been asked to leave the house. She chose to leave it. Our son has no shortage of proposals. For him, we may find any girl.”

The reconciliators also tried to scale back one party's demands so that the other party wouldn't think they were representing the interests of just one party in an effort to end the negotiation deadlocks. The most distinctive and visible requirement for reconciliation, especially from the female spouse side was to have a separate home. But rather than asking for a separate house, the reconciliators used their negotiation skills and private counselling to bring these desires to a separate portion or section of the same house, which otherwise may have put a financial and emotional burden on the male spouse and his family. The reconciliators were found to be aligned with the norm of staying and caretaking of parents at older age. Therefore, living in a separate unit of the same house may limit the interference of families in spousal matters but it remains the extension of the family and it will keep the family fabric strong. The reconciliators were shown employing their persuasive abilities rather than their influencing abilities to settle the disputes, which appeared to have long-term consequences. As narrated by the male spouse reconciliator:

“She was adamant that she wanted her own house. My brother was refusing to comply with this request. I persuaded my brother to give his son a separate area in the same house to avoid any further conflicts, and I later convinced her that a separate area was equivalent to a separate house. They are now content with their lives.”

The mediators hoped that their efforts would lead to a successful resolution. Reconciliators believe that for a marriage to last and be of higher quality, it is essential to overlook mistakes and demonstrate flexibility when resolving conflicts. They discovered that families' attention to even the most minute details/mistakes led to tensions that intensified and eventually resulted in divorce. At the same time, these mediators came to the conclusion that the fact that both families shown flexibility prevented things from getting out of hand. The female spouse reconciliators reported the following:

"A single person is not accountable in a divorce. Such incidents are the product of a collective mistake. In these situations, some persons play major roles and others make small contributions. It's critical to overlook children's errors and give them the opportunity to solve problems in their own way."

As a result, family members may be considered to play a key and active part in resolving the dispute of the spouses through tactics such as anger and aggression of the spouse, overcoming impasses, offering personal therapy, and restoring the emotional involvement among spouses and their families through dialogues.

DISCUSSION:

The main aim of this study was to understand the role of normative orientation of the reconciliators and spouses while managing marital conflicts. The patriarchal norms of segregating male and female roles in public spaces and private spaces respectively dominated in defining marital interaction of the spouses. This gender role segregation plays vital role in deciding the responsibilities of the spouses, and their effectiveness as spouses. Furthermore, it also provides the basis to resolve their conflict by aligning with pre-defined marital roles (Nielson et al., 2020). Following the segregated gender roles are the base marital interaction as the spouses develop, evaluate and label their relations with this segregation of activities. The deviance from the pre-defined roles being unacceptable causes conflict and affects the quality of the relationship. The collectiveness of the family may be good for the family network. Still, it is creating conflict among

spouses because male spouses are unable to balance between their spouses and their family of origin. They are limiting their roles as bread earners. Therefore, they expect their spouses to be responsible for all the family-centered services (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 1996). This creates role conflict for working women, an extra burden on housewives. Women as a spouse are found to be at subordination positions but women as mothers-in-law are controlling and dominating (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001). Husbands were also found answerable and aligned to the regulated norms of gender performance. They played an active role as a supporter of their mothers and family of origin in making their wives aligned and attached the family norms. Due to the son's support, mothers-in-law act as a proxy patriarch by taking the support of a male child and exerting control and dominance over the daughters-in-law (Sohail & Usman, 2021).

The findings suggested significant importance of reconciliators in resolving the disputes of the spouses. They found to be using all vital strategies of providing confidential vent, providing possible amicable solutions and restoring trust of both parties (Chan et al., 2008). Gender role segregation was the dominating normative orientation used by the reconciliators during the negotiation process of spouses. Rather than encouraging the partners to accept normative change, such as women's employment, they tend to assure women to keep themselves aligned with the norms of women as homemakers (Dempsey, 2005). Uniformity was seen in that only male members were identified or considered appropriate by the family members to resolve the conflict of spouses. This further endorsed the patriarchal mindset of society, which considers males as dominant members of society. The patriarchal arrangement and power domination were also reflected through the power arrangements of family relations. The family of the male spouse was found to be dominating being parents of male spouse, and it was confirmed by reconciliations as they found difficulty in bringing them to the negotiation table (Yuan, 2019). Therefore, it is pertinent to note that the normative orientation of society influences the arousal and dissolution of conflicts in marital arrangements. The

normative orientation of marital interaction is strictly following the patriarchal gender order of society.

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