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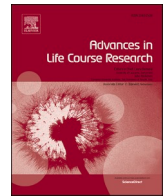
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Interdependence and waithood: Exploration of family dynamics and young adults' life course trajectories in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Youth transitions to adulthood are increasingly characterized by delayed marriages, education and job disparities, and protracted financial dependency in Pakistan, engendering the phenomenon of “waithood.” This study poses the question: what are the effects of family dynamics and intergenerational relationships on the life course trajectories of Pakistani young adults in waithood, particularly in terms of education, career, marriage, gender roles, and societal influences? Employing a relational and intersectional perspective, we investigated the experiences of waithood among 30 youths (aged between 18 and 30 years) and 20 parents from various socioeconomic and regional backgrounds across Pakistan. Data collected through in-depth interviews elucidate how structural constraints, social expectations, and the intersections of class, place (rural-urban), and gender shape how youth experience waithood. For young females, there are enduring cultural pressures to marry early and to normatively perform domesticity, roles that can constrain women's educational and employment trajectories. At the same time, male youth confront masculine anxieties stemming from societal expectations of conventional breadwinner roles. Under the pressure of economic dependence, opportunities vary considerably for them across different classes and regional locations. We found that youth consciously extend their identity exploration, particularly in upper-class urban strata, in stark contrast to disadvantaged rural youth for whom waithood suggests a compelled suspension of personal progression. Thus, by locating youth perspectives within linked lives and cultural contexts, our manuscript provides important insights into their diverse transitional experiences on pathways to adulthood in Pakistan's transforming opportunity landscape.

1. Introduction

Denoting delayed or stalled transitions to adulthood, waithood has become a salient analytical category for investigating youth trajectories, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Dhillon & Yousef, 2011). The term “waithood” was first coined by Diane Singerman (2007) to describe Middle Eastern youth extending their adolescence while preparing resources for marriage. This period delineates an extended phase of uncertainty between adolescence and fully realized adulthood, capturing the multifaceted financial, socio-cultural, and psychological difficulties that affect youth in securing conventional milestones of maturity (Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2020; Singerman, 2011). While initially applied to the (MENA) region, the concept of waithood has global relevance (Dhillon & Yousef, 2011).

Evaluating waithood necessitates integrating both cultural and transitional perspectives to fully comprehend its multifaceted nature

(Furlong, 2012; Paice, 2021). The cultural perspective emphasizes youth agency, the emergence of subcultures, and the ways youth confront their lived experiences, while the transitional perspective focuses on structural aspects, examining youth in the intermediary phase between childhood and adulthood and considering the economic, social, and political factors affecting waithood. However, critics argue that waithood is oversimplified in policy discourses, reducing it to a state of stoicism and neglecting the complex realities faced by youth (Sumberg et al., 2021). This underscores the need to shift attention from merely integrating youth into the workforce to a more meticulous understanding of their experiences.

Although recent research has provided insights into how gender differences influence waithood-related educational and career trajectories in Pakistan (Aslam, 2009; Bukhari et al., 2019), there is a dearth of youth-focused studies that offer nuanced understandings of how young men and women navigate family relationships and negotiate waithood

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within the confines of the prevailing gender system. This gap underscores the need to bridge micro and macro perspectives by blending structural analysis of waithood with its experiential contours within familial relationships.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by investigating how family dynamics and intergenerational relationships affect the life course trajectories of young adults experiencing waithood in Pakistan. Specifically, we examine young adults' lived experiences regarding their pathways in education, careers, and marriage during this period. We also investigate the dynamics of intergenerational bonds and family interactions implicated in youth waithood. By probing how young men and women experience and maneuver within familial relationships, we seek to delineate gender distinctions. Finally, we consider how gender roles and family dynamics are shaped by broader societal norms and beliefs, influencing young people's life course trajectories during this period of waithood.

2. Theoretical framework

The study adopts a relational life course perspective (Roy et al., 2022) to explore how reciprocal ties within families shape youths' transitions in Pakistan. Building on Carr's (2018) observation that life course stages are rooted in social groups and shared affiliations, we consider how structural constraints, cultural norms, and shifting family relationships collectively extend or reshape pathways to adulthood. Here, Honwana's (2014a) notion of "waithood" is especially salient, highlighting how entrenched inequalities and social expectations in the Global South can stall conventional markers of adult status.

Within this relational framework, the concept of "linked lives" (Elder, 1998; Greenfield et al., 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2022) emphasizes how intergenerational relationships—through obligations, expectations, and support—shape the opportunities and limitations that young people face. Moreover, Jeffrey's (2010) concept of "timepass" complements this focus by illustrating how young adults navigate prolonged uncertainties through everyday strategies, while De Lannoy and Langa's (2021) idea of "ambiguous agency" further shows how they adapt, resist, or creatively reorganize their options under adverse conditions. Taken together, these perspectives emphasize that individual trajectories arise through constant negotiation between familial bonds, collective contexts, and systemic forces that often redefine the timing and shape of adulthood.

The framework also examines how societal messages about gender lead to asymmetrical standards within families, with young women and men facing unequal expectations and opportunities during their transition to adulthood (Crockett & Beal, 2012). This gendered dimension of waiting, as Honwana (2014a) articulates, becomes particularly pronounced in traditional societies where cultural expectations create additional barriers to young women's transitions. Jeffrey and Young (2012) work on caste and politics further illuminates how such social hierarchies intersect with waiting experiences, shaping collective identities and political engagement among youth. Additionally, as Kelly et al. (2023) suggest, this framework elucidates the sociocultural structuration of lives, analyzing how broader societal forces manifest within family relationships to configure personal life trajectories during waithood. Jeffrey, (2008) analysis reveals waiting as not merely a passive state but as a potential catalyst for change while maintaining strong familial interdependencies.

To strengthen this analysis, we also draw on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to examine how class, place, and gender converge. This lens illuminates the differential vulnerabilities and opportunities that structure youth transitions to adulthood in Pakistan. While many young people struggle with delayed milestones under patriarchal norms and volatile economic conditions, some adeptly contest or negotiate these constraints, underscoring the importance of individual and collective agency. Situating their experiences within family ties and broader sociocultural forces shows that such relationships, though

influential, do not unilaterally determine life trajectories. Instead, waithood emerges through a shifting interplay of systemic forces and situated resilience, highlighting that protracted waiting periods are neither uniform nor entirely passive.

3. Waithood and the Pakistani context

Pakistan presents a compelling case for examining waithood through changing familial dynamics. With over 64 % of its population under the age of 30, Pakistan is one of the youngest countries globally (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021), and its median age is 20.4 years (United Nations, 2024). Despite this youth bulge offering both opportunities and challenges, Pakistan ranks among the bottom ten countries on age-specific youth development indicators (Sathar et al., 2016). Economic and political crises, coupled with unstable career and life opportunities, significantly stall youth advancement into adulthood (Arif & Chaudhry, 2008). Structural factors such as restrictive cultural norms, fluctuating economic conditions, and educational gaps contribute to the prevalent waithood in Pakistan (Dhillon et al., 2009; Hafeez & Fasih, 2018). For example, inflation-induced anxiety, natural calamities, IMF bailouts, and energy crises exacerbate these challenges (Hafeez & Fasih, 2018). Shah et al. (2020) further demonstrate the uneven impact on young people facing unstable economic conditions, unemployment, and declining wages in an increasingly informal labor market.

Cultural standards of adulthood in Pakistan are deeply rooted in societal expectations around employment, marriage, and family responsibilities (Hamid et al., 2011). Societal expectations emphasize men as the primary breadwinners, placing immense pressure on young men to secure stable employment before considering marriage (Aslam & Kingdon, 2012). For women, cultural norms often prioritize marriage and family responsibilities over personal educational and career ambitions (Ali et al., 2011). Time poverty disproportionately affects women, who are often burdened with domestic responsibilities from a young age, limiting their ability to pursue education or employment opportunities (Chaudhry & Rahman, 2009). These gendered social roles and the pursuit of financial independence are additional expectations accompanying biological maturation (Dhillon et al., 2009), significantly shaping the experiences of youth in Pakistan.

The family structure in Pakistan is undergoing notable transformations, with a shift from traditional extended family units to more nuclear setups (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). This shift, especially in urban settings, affects gender roles and expectations (Akram, 2018). While patriarchal norms continue to dominate family relations (Farooq, 2020; Shah, 2024), recent years have seen a slow yet perceptible shift in gender roles, influenced by rising female education rates and urbanization (Akram, 2018). According to recent demographic data, there is a slight increase in the average age at first marriage of women (from 19.5 to 21.3 years) over the last two decades (Rasul et al., 2022). The average age of mothers at first birth is 24.2 years (Naz et al., 2023), indicating that early motherhood remains common. Fertility rates, while decreasing in recent decades, still average around 3.2 children per woman (Macrotrends, 2024), highlighting the emphasis on larger family sizes. Such demographic trends significantly shape family life, with young adults often pressured to marry and start families early, aligning with societal norms around adulthood.

Troublingly, Pakistan's working-age population is projected to experience a 60 % surge by 2050, exacerbating already high levels of educated unemployment (Sathar, 2012). These adverse structural realities engender manifold challenges for Pakistani youth in actualizing conventional adulthood transitions related to higher education, economic self-sufficiency, and marriage (Hamid et al., 2011; Jalalani & Shah, 2019). Consequently, waithood has emerged as a defining modality of young adults' transitional trajectories in contemporary Pakistan.

4. Methods

For this study, we employed qualitative methods to delve into the experiences and viewpoints of Pakistani youth on family dynamics and interdependence during their waithood phase. Such a qualitative approach was essential for a deep, context-sensitive exploration of this multifaceted issue, aligning with the methodological frameworks in youth transitions and life course research (Giele & Elder, 1998). To understand how individuals interpret significant events in their lives, we conducted semi-structured interviews for data collection and employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for the in-depth analysis of the participants' experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). In the sociocultural and geographic context of this study, IPA offered an appropriate framework for a contextualized analysis of Pakistani youths' gendered experiences of waithood and interdependence within shifting family relationships and societal expectations.

5. Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 30 young adults (aged 18–30 years) and 20 parents from diverse socioeconomic and regional backgrounds in Pakistan. These participants were not explicitly dyad pairs; rather, the parents represented a supplementary group that provided additional perspectives. Specifically, the parent group consisted of 10 mothers and 10 fathers related to the youth participants, which enabled us to explore family dynamics through a broader lens, though the focus was not on analyzing dyad couples exclusively.

We (the authors) were directly involved as primary data collectors from start to finish. Specifically, we identified potential participants through personal networks, community organizations, and social media apps, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Once initial contact was established, we provided a brief overview of the study's aims and invited them to participate if they met our inclusion criteria. The key inclusion criteria for youth participants were: (i) aged 18–30 years and living with parents; (ii) unemployed, studying, or working part-time; (iii) self-identified as being in a waithood phase; and (iv) willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. To ascertain participants' self-identified "waithood status," we began each interview by offering a brief explanation of waithood as a transitional life stage characterized by delayed or prolonged entry into traditionally recognized markers of adulthood (e.g., stable employment, marriage, and financial independence). We invited participants to reflect on whether they felt this description applied to their current experiences. Their responses allowed us to situate them within or outside of waithood according to their own perspectives rather than imposing a predefined or researcher-determined categorization.

Moreover, we sought diversity in sampling in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location (rural-urban). The sample comprised 18 women and 12 men, with 10 participants each from upper, middle, and lower socioeconomic strata, categorized based on household income. The sample included 12 young adults from rural settings and 9 each from small towns and large cities, covering a range of family structures such as nuclear, joint, and extended households.

The demographic and socioeconomic profiles of both the youth participants and their parents are as follows:

Category	Sub-category	Frequency (Youth Participants)	Frequency (Parents)
Gender	Male	12	10
	Female	18	10
Age	18–21 years	14	-
	22–25 years	10	-
	26–30 years	6	-
	35–45 years	-	8
	46–55 years	-	9
	56–65 years	-	3
Location	Urban metro cities	9	5

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Category	Sub-category	Frequency (Youth Participants)	Frequency (Parents)
Religion	Small towns	9	6
	Rural villages	12	9
	Muslim	28	18
	Christian	2	2
Marital status	Unmarried	24	0
	Married	6	20
Education	No formal education	-	6
	High school	5	7
	College/University	16	4
	Professional Degree	9	3
Family monthly income	Upper class (>USD 1200)	10	-
	Middle class (USD 300–1200)	10	-
	Lower class (<USD 300)	10	-
Father's occupation	Business	-	5
	Professional	-	2
	Skilled labor	-	3
	Unemployed	-	-
Mother's occupation	Business	-	3
	Professional	-	1
	Homemaker	-	6

The primary data collection method consisted of intensive qualitative interviews based on a semi-structured protocol. Interviews were identified as the most suitable technique for an in-depth IPA-based exploration of personal experiences, meanings, and life-worlds (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). The youth and parent interviews averaged 90 and 60 minutes, respectively, and were audio-recorded with permission. They were conducted in Urdu to facilitate free expression of experiences.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions to elicit detailed narratives regarding family dynamics, socioeconomic circumstances, cultural norms, and gendered pathways during waithood. Topics included lived experiences of dependence, parental expectations, managing education and employment, friendships and dating, and marital pressures. The interview approach was flexible, interactive, and attentive, enabling youth to shape the flow while discussing issues most salient to their experiences. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. Data collection was concluded at the point of saturation. The study protocol received clearance from Quaid-i-Azam University's School of Sociology Ethical Review Committee. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants after briefing them on the study objectives, confidentiality policies, potential risks, and right to withdraw. All personal identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were employed to protect anonymity. Interview transcripts were securely stored, encrypted, and password-protected. The research findings were shared with those participants who requested it.

5.1. Analysis

Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes examining how individuals ascribe meaning to significant life experiences within personal and social contexts (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021), we analyzed the transcripts using NVivo software to code and retrieve key themes. We engaged in a recursive process moving from descriptive to interpretive analysis: repeatedly reading verbatim transcripts to note points of descriptive interest; identifying emergent themes through detailed line-by-line coding of participants' experiential claims, concerns, and meanings; cataloging salient themes to capture convergence and divergence among participant accounts; and establishing conceptual connections among preliminary themes to elicit higher-order categories. These categories were then organized into

superordinate themes reflecting the study's objectives.

To bolster analytic rigor based on suggested criteria for high-quality IPA research (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021), participants reviewed their interview transcripts to validate interpretations, and an audit trail containing detailed coding notes enabled analytic transparency. Inter-coder reliability was ensured through peer debriefing and independent coding by an associate analyzer for inter-rater agreement. Finally, we balanced convergence and divergence among participant accounts to avoid decontextualized generalizations. We contextualized salient themes within existing literature and the study's theoretical framework of linked lives and interdependent pathways.

6. Results

The study identifies three interconnected themes that shape the gendered experiences of waithood among young adults in Pakistan: First, *Cultural Expectations and Gender Dynamics* reveal how socioeconomic status, geographic location, and family setups intersect to influence youth to navigate education, employment, and marriage challenges during their semi-dependent life phase; second, *Family Structures and Relational Interdependencies* highlight how macro societal forces like urbanization and the shift toward nuclear families recalibrate relational ties, extending uncertainties between adolescence and adulthood while deepening bonds between youth and parents amid material limitations that prolong waithood; and third, the *Waithood and Intersectional Differences* provides a textured analysis by shedding light on the major inequalities in opportunity structures arising from the interplay of socioeconomic circumstances, geographical contexts, and persistent gendered norms, thus shaping the varied lived experiences of young adults in Pakistan.

6.1. Cultural expectations and gender dynamics

This theme delves into the complex dynamics of sociocultural ideas, gender conventions, and familial expectations that influence the daily lives of young people in Pakistan as they negotiate the transitional phase known as waithood. The analysis underscores the significance of prioritizing the viewpoints of young individuals, specifically focusing on how gender impacts their experiences in terms of school, job, and marriage within the family context. This emphasizes the sociological importance of how these initial stages of life shape their gendered experiences, exposing them to distinctive and challenging circumstances.

6.1.1. Educational aspirations vs constraints

The majority of young adults displayed great ambition when questioned about their educational aspirations. The aspirations of their families for upward social mobility and recognition served as the driving force behind their aims. The prevailing belief was that a bachelor's degree was a prerequisite for most of the professional employment. As Sana (female, 22, urban, middle-class) remarked:

As soon as I finished college [12th grade], my parents wanted me to complete my BS [undergrad]. They expected me to do CSS [competitive exam for Central Superior Services] or get a good job. ...and thereby increase our family's status.

However, many confronted limitations in materializing their educational goals. Affordability issues and early marriages abbreviated women's education, especially among lower-income rural families. As Tamanna (female, 19, rural, lower-class) mentioned, "I wanted to continue studying but couldn't after intermediate [grade 12] because my father had very limited finances to afford our education. So my parents decided for [my] early marriage."

This underscores how the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and familial expectations intricately shapes educational trajectories. Tamanna's experience reveals a compounded marginalization faced by lower-class, rural women—where gender, class, and location converge to limit opportunities. Her educational journey was curtailed

not merely by economic limitations but by normative pressures to fulfill prescribed gender roles, such as early marriage. Utilizing an intersectional lens, Tamanna's case illustrates how socioeconomic precarity and patriarchal norms coalesce, positioning early marriage as a socially sanctioned resolution to financial instability, thereby reinforcing structural barriers that deprioritize education for young women in marginalized communities.

Male respondents also reported discontinuing university education due to financial constraints and the need to support their families. Arsalan (male, 20, urban, lower-class) lamentedly expressed that "I was a good student, but unfortunately, I had to leave [college] during my bachelor's to work at my uncle's shop due to financial problems at home."

Most parents endorsed education as paramount for daughters, too. As Maham (mother, urban, upper-class) asserted, "We never made any distinctions between our children. In today's world, educating girls is just as important as educating boys for their own careers and marriages."

These excerpts highlight the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and place in shaping educational trajectories. Arsalan's experience underscores the financial precarity faced by young men from lower-class backgrounds, where educational aspirations are often sacrificed to meet immediate economic needs. Conversely, Maham's assertion reflects a shift in gender norms among the urban upper-class, emphasizing the growing recognition of the value of female education—not only for career prospects but also as a prerequisite for social mobility and marital stability.

However, financial limitations often played a role, leading lower-income families to prioritize sons' education, as explained by Nafisa (mother, rural, lower-class), "While living hand to mouth, we could only afford to educate one child up to graduation level, so my husband decided to spend on our son considering him a future breadwinner for us."

Nafisa's situation starkly illustrates the economic hardships faced by lower-income, rural families in Pakistan, where financial limitations often prioritize sons' education over daughters', perpetuating traditional gender roles. While Maham's views reflect changing educational norms among the affluent, the reality for many like Nafisa is a gap between verbal support for gender equality and the persistence of gendered resource allocation—a tension also evident in Athamneh and Benjamin's (2021) findings on Palestinian girls. This disparity between ideals and realities persists, particularly in marginalized contexts, shaping labor market integration in Pakistan along gender, class, and regional lines.

Despite rising support for female education, societal norms, and structural barriers continue to hinder women's employment, contributing to a female labor force participation rate of just 22 % and disproportionately high youth unemployment rates, affecting women at 51 % compared to men at 16 % (Ahsan & Khan, 2023). Even with educational attainment, young graduates—especially women—face underemployment, revealing the disconnect between education and viable employment opportunities, as Shah (2020) highlights. These challenges are further pronounced in rural areas, where constrained opportunities widen the gap between educational aspirations and employment outcomes.

6.1.2. Masculine burdens: expectations versus realities

Female youth faced gender-specific challenges at the intersection of cultural norms and financial realities, whereas male youth's tales of delayed adulthood emphasized unique pressures associated with masculinity. The testimonies revealed the discrepancies between the prevailing narratives regarding men's role as primary earners and the actualities of prolonged financial dependency and unfulfilled career objectives. For instance, Waqar, who was 28, from a rural area and lower social class background, mentioned, "For me, it is humiliating if I'm unable to earn at this age according to society's standards. Other men judge me as not man enough. [In grief] My self-respect has been

damaged.” Similarly, Hamza (27, urban, middle-class) explained, “I feel so much guilty for not being able to assist my family financially and to contribute to improve their living conditions. This is generally expected of sons here.”

These extracts reveal the crisis of masculinity triggered by the inability to meet financial responsibilities in Pakistan, as seen in Waqar’s sense of humiliation and Hamza’s guilt. Economic constraints, particularly in rural and lower-income areas, exacerbate the gap between societal expectations of men as providers and their lived realities, creating significant psychological strain. This aligns with Philip’s (2022) findings in India, where men in both rural and urban contexts face similar crises when unable to fulfill traditional masculine ideals tied to economic productivity.

Their despair was echoed by fathers like Rafiq (rural, lower-class): “As fathers, we also feel ashamed of our inability to secure our sons’ futures due to hardship and poverty.”

Most mothers also reiterated masculine expectations of financial provision, with Samina (rural, lower-class) observing: “Our culture and tradition places much pressure on sons to establish careers and provide for families.”

However, the salience of marriage in conferring adulthood respectability also engendered enormous pressures on unemployed men. This was mentioned by Waqar (28, rural, lower-class), “my mother insists that I should marry soon to settle down. But no family in our society will accept an unemployed son-in-law.”

Respondents reveal a dissonance between cultural expectations of masculinity and socioeconomic constraints during waitthood. Patriarchal ideals designate men as providers, but economic dependency undermines masculine esteem, leading to self-blame and despair. Family expectations, especially mothers’ emphasis on financial responsibility, intensify this psychological burden. For low-income young men, the inability to fulfill breadwinner roles triggers a crisis of masculinity, as unemployment impedes their transition to adulthood. These findings illuminate the clash between enduring patriarchal norms and harsh economic realities, revealing the cultural underpinnings of masculine psychological stress.

6.1.3. Marital Pressures: Gendered Timelines and Constraints

The intricate interconnection between conventional standards and increasing expenses was also apparent in conversations around the timing of marriage. Although men were given more flexibility, women universally expressed intense parental expectations to marry before reaching their mid-20s. Hadia (female, 27, urban, upper-class) narrated her views, mentioning, “After completing my degree from a good university at the age of 24, the very next day, my mother started arranging *rishtas* [matches]. For her, I was getting old now.”

The term *rishta* in Pakistani culture symbolizes not only a marriage proposal but the societal pressures around marriage suitability. Hadia’s case highlights how even upper-class women, despite prestigious educational achievements, are not exempt from these pressures. Her mother’s urgency to arrange a match immediately after her graduation reveals how cultural expectations prioritize marriage over personal or professional accomplishments. This reflects the enduring belief that a woman’s ultimate success is marked by her “marriageability” rather than her individual achievements, underscoring the intersection of gender norms, education, and familial expectations in shaping women’s life trajectories.

Sana (female, 22, urban, middle-class) argued, “Girls have a shorter shelf life here; any delay to find an appropriate spouse is seen negatively in this society.”

Sana’s statement about women’s “shelf life” powerfully underscores their commodification in Pakistani society, where their perceived value diminishes with age, especially in the marriage market. For middle-class families, marriage remains both an economic strategy and a marker of family honor, with delays seen as a failure to meet societal expectations. Consequently, education becomes a secondary asset—valued only as it

enhances a woman’s marriage prospects rather than as a means of personal achievement. This highlights the pervasive cultural emphasis on early marriage, which restricts women’s autonomy and relegates their aspirations to secondary importance.

Concurrently, societal pressures and constraints also lead to delayed marriages among men, indicating a broader trend of postponed marriage across genders:

My sisters married late because we faced difficulty in amassing dowry due to the loss of our father at an early age. I can not think of marrying myself before marrying all [three] my sisters. Many men now also delay marriage due to unemployment and high living costs. (Faiz, male, 26, urban, lower-class)

Discussions with youth and their parents revealed a prevalent concern about the “marriage squeeze,” primarily due to excessive dowry demands transforming marriages into substantial financial burdens. Riffat, a middle-class urban mother, illustrated this trend: “*Even average matches now expect a car and home from the girl’s parents.*” This reflects that for middle and lower-class families like Riffat’s, the pressure to meet these inflated dowry demands can create significant financial strain, sometimes leading to years of marriage postponement as families work to gather the necessary resources. This not only puts stress on the families but also on young women and men, whose life courses are put on hold while they wait for their families to meet the financial obligations required for marriage.

However, women’s education and employment were sometimes utilized to strategically compensate for marriage delays:

I went for my Master’s degree to up my chances of getting married. You know, over here, if you’ve got a higher degree, folks aren’t so picky about how old you are or how you look. (Sana, 22, urban, middle-class)

I was an ordinary girl waiting for a good proposal. But since I got a teaching job at a government school, I’ve received many offers to get married, and some of those are from good, respectable families, too. (Hina, 27, small town, lower-class)

These narratives underscore women’s constrained autonomy in managing delayed marriages, often resorting to higher education or respectable employment to offset age-related concerns during marital negotiations. Such pursuits, seen as compensatory strategies, reflect a broader shift in marriage patterns influenced by dowry pressures and economic instability. For women, delays are framed by cultural notions of age and marriageability, while men face pressures around financial readiness. This evolving dynamic reveals how traditional gender norms are reshaped by economic challenges, with dowry practices and rising living costs posing significant barriers, thus altering life trajectories for young adults in Pakistan.

6.2. Family structures and relational interdependencies

This theme elucidates how broader transformations in family structures intersect with enduring kinship norms to configure youth experiences of interdependence and waitthood in Pakistan’s shifting sociocultural landscape and highlight two inter-related aspects—multigenerational co-residence and evolving nuclear families.

6.2.1. Multigenerational ties: asset or liability?

Youths’ prolongation in parents’ homes well into adulthood due to waitthood also maintained their embeddedness within multigenerational family structures—this mediated complex negotiations and trade-offs between interdependence, autonomy, and obligations. On the one hand, continued co-residence enabled relational proximity and guidance from elders - providing a sense of security and support as young adults navigate the challenges of the modern world. This was evident from interview extracts of our participants:

...The knowledge and experience of my grandfather have been very helpful to me in making decisions about relationships, my career, and emotional issues. I’m thankful to Allah that he is with us to share what he knows based on his experiences. (Sana, female, 22, urban, middle

class)

Sana's reflection reveals the cultural significance of elders as pillars of wisdom in Pakistan, where *Biradari* (Kinship network) binds young adults to extended family networks. Her positive experience also underscores how middle-class resources and an urban upbringing may support intergenerational co-residence, particularly for young women who can benefit from elders' knowledge. This intergenerational guidance acts as a stabilizing force, helping younger generations navigate the tension between traditional expectations and modern pressures.

Conversely, data also indicated disagreements among youth due to perceived compromises to autonomy and over-interference in personal affairs by elderly relatives. Intensive intergenerational contact thus appears challenging as well; as mentioned by Hina (female, 27, small town, lower class), "privacy is impossible at our home. Elders always interfere in matters like relationships and personal decisions. I want freedom, at least for my own decisions and actions."

For Hina, limited space and conservative norms magnify the lack of privacy, demonstrating how gender and socioeconomic disadvantage converge to restrict autonomy in extended families. Her yearning for "freedom" reflects a clash between individual autonomy and entrenched collectivist values. Tauheed, a rural mother, emphasizes "respect for elders," highlighting the persistence of traditional values, particularly in rural areas. In contrast, Deeba, an urban mother, speaks of the "generation gaps in decision making," capturing the growing disconnect between youth seeking autonomy and elders upholding traditional authority.

Multigenerational ties in Pakistan serve as both an asset and a liability for young adults. While the wisdom and support of elders provide invaluable resources for navigating the challenges of waitthood, these same relationships can also inhibit personal freedom and create intergenerational conflicts. These contrasting examples reveal how the same multigenerational setting can function as a protective network for some while exacerbating patriarchal oversight for others, highlighting the intersectional nature of class, place, and gender in shaping youths' experiences of extended living arrangements.

6.2.2. Shifting youth-parent dynamics in nuclear families

Our data reveal the shifting dynamics of family structures and intergenerational dependencies amidst Pakistan's rapid socioeconomic changes. Limited social protections intensify youth reliance on family, even as opportunities for emerging adulthood remain constrained. Mothers, particularly in nuclear households, bear the brunt of maintaining familial stability during uncertain transitions. Despite aspirations for greater individualization, young adults like Jibran express challenges in finding adequate support outside the traditional joint family system:

I am not in favor of joint families because, in nuclear homes, parents focus more on developing children's independent personalities without interference from anyone. ...My parents realized this very early and decided to quit living in a joint family after two years of their marriage. (Jibran, male, 26, urban, upper class)

For Jibran, secure finances and cultural capital ease the move toward a nuclear setup that fosters individual autonomy. Yet, this privilege is unattainable for many who lack similar resources or social acceptance, as reflected by Fakhira's opinion:

After migrating to the city, with no grandparents or uncles here, all responsibilities fall upon my parents. They not only had to work full-time jobs to support us financially, but they also had to take care of us [as caregivers]. They were left with the burden of fulfilling all the expectations and providing support without any assistance from extended family members. (Fakhira, female, 29, urban, lower class)

Fakhira's challenges illustrate how gendered expectations and limited income in urban contexts can intensify women's caregiving responsibilities when extended kin are not present, revealing how intersectional factors constrain or enable the nuclear family model.

Jibran and Fakhira's narratives illustrate the complex dynamics of

shifting from joint to nuclear family structures. Together, these perspectives underscore both the allure of autonomy and the increased pressures faced by nuclear families in managing day-to-day life independently, affected by class and gender.

Mothers, being part of an affluent class, confirmed heightened expectations for developing children's autonomy, as mentioned by Deeba (urban, upper class), "I encourage my daughter to make her own decisions, unlike the joint family restrictions I grew up with."

Paradoxically, these mothers also noted greater intergenerational dependence in nuclear contexts:

As you know, they [youth] do not have any extended family members here to assist them in today's society, they are forced to rely solely on their parents for social, financial, and emotional assistance while they attempt to obtain degrees, find employment, or get married. (Maham, urban, upper class)

Moreover, career-oriented mothers described being overburdened while living in a nuclear setup, as encapsulated by Asma (urban, middle class):

I am a working mother for the last 16 years. In nuclear homes, mothers have to perform both parental and nanny roles along with their professional responsibilities because we do not have reliable babysitting services available here in Pakistan. This has been very exhausting for me, and I often wish my children could have their grandparents living with us to take care of them during my working hours.

Taken together, these narratives show how the shift from joint to nuclear families operates differently depending on class, region, and gender, confirming the importance of an intersectional lens to fully grasp how youth and parents negotiate waitthood under varying structural conditions. While young adults seek greater individualization, reduced support systems increase burdens on parents, especially mothers, who balance professional roles with caregiving. This mirrors findings by [Meler \(2021\)](#) and [Herbst-Debby et al. \(2022\)](#), where urban migration reshaped family dynamics for Palestinian women, empowering them while intensifying familial responsibilities. Such parallels underscore the renegotiation of roles within nuclear households as individuals navigate autonomy amidst increased demands during waitthood.

6.3. Waitthood and intersectional differences

The nexus between class (socioeconomic status), place (rural-urban divides), and gender identities mediate diverse waitthood realities for youth in Pakistan, and we demonstrate in this theme how broader structural disparities become manifest in localized ways through intersecting differences, beginning with how waitthood is experienced across various social class categories.

For instance, our data shows that waitthood is a strategic period of growth before high-status careers for affluent individuals, while for the less privileged, it embodies prolonged uncertainty and limited options. These contrasting experiences underscore the structural inequalities that mediate youth transitions in Pakistan. This was evident from interview accounts of our participants across various social classes. Ali, 23, who belonged to an urban upper social class background, narrated, "After graduating, I took two years for self-discovery while interning at my father's company. I explored different career possibilities in my industry. This allowed me to gain valuable skills and experiences before joining my family business."

These upper-class youth could afford the luxury of self-exploration and skill development due to financial security. As Zayn (28 years), a male from the urban upper class, explained, "Before enrolling in MBA, I started my own tech business to gain practical experience. Unfortunately, the business did not succeed, and I had to close it down."

Ali and Zayn's experiences illustrate how waitthood for affluent youth becomes a period of strategic exploration rather than uncertainty. Ali leverages his financial security to intern at his father's company, using this time to build skills and prepare for a seamless career

transition. Similarly, Zayn's failed business venture had no lasting repercussions due to the economic safety net provided by his family. For both, waitthood is marked by intentional growth, experimentation, and skill acquisition, reflecting the privilege of upper-class youth who can navigate this phase without the immediate financial pressures faced by their less privileged peers.

On the contrary, respondents from middle- and lower-class backgrounds faced challenging circumstances that compelled them to abandon their dreams of further education. For instance, Khadija (female, 20, rural, lower class) argued, "After grade 10, my family could not afford further schooling. Now I sit idle and feel hopeless about my future." Similarly, Waqar (male, 28, urban, lower class) narrated, "I had to abandon my BBA to work as a taxi driver to sustain my family during economic hardship. My dreams are unfulfilled."

Khadija's and Waqar's narratives illustrate how waitthood for lower-class youth is marked by constrained opportunities, economic insecurity, and a profound sense of hopelessness. Structural barriers limit their educational and financial prospects, trapping them in uncertainty. In contrast, upper-class youth often experience waitthood as a period of growth, though economic privilege does not eliminate discontent. Even those with resources face pressures from parental expectations, highlighting the nuanced and complex nature of navigating waitthood across social classes. This was evident from the interview account of Samira (female, 22, urban, upper class), who mentioned that "Even though I have everything I need, my parents being too involved in my decisions is stressing me out during this transition period [waitthood]."

Moreover, our results also show that waitthood experience varies significantly between urban and rural regions. Distinct pathways also unfolded across these regional milieus where rural youth described limited educational and employment avenues in rural areas; the limitations are profound, particularly in education and employment.

Here work options are only farming or daily wage labor, which are unstable sources of income and don't provide a path for professional development. How can we progress in life without getting higher education or having exposure to the outside world? (Liaquat, male, 28, rural, middle class).

Liaquat's frustration encapsulates the limited employment opportunities—farming or daily wage labor—available to rural youth, both of which offer little stability or prospects for advancement. His question, "How can we progress in life without getting higher education or having exposure to the outside world?" highlights the isolation and lack of educational infrastructure that hinder rural youth from advancing socially and economically.

In contrast, urban areas like Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore provide broader employment and educational opportunities, enabling greater social mobility. Migration to cities thus emerges as a strategy for rural youth to access better prospects, underscoring the disparity in opportunities between urban and rural contexts. Imtiaz (male, 28, urban, lower class) argued, "I moved from my village to Lahore for my MPhil at Punjab University, where education opportunities are far better than any university in other cities of the Punjab."

However, large cities also pose challenges. Faiz, a 26-year-old lower-income boy living in an urban area, explained how the high costs in metro areas delay marriages, further extending the phase of waitthood:

In big cities like Islamabad, the expenses of food, transport, and paying for housing postpone marriages for a long time. Because men have to save up a lot of money before getting married, it takes much longer to reach that stage of life where you can afford a spouse.

Our data further shows a stark gender divide in the experiences of our participants, as most of the female participants experienced a premature halt in their educational careers due to the unavailability of schools, leading to a life confined to domestic roles. Meanwhile, the men from rural areas faced a lack of diverse job opportunities, which not only restricted their social mobility but also their ability to progress in life. It was evident from the interview extracts of the participants:

In villages, girls can hardly obtain middle-school education due to

the lack of high schools. Then we just sit at home learning home skills like cooking because there are no other opportunities for us to continue our studies or to start a career. (Yasmeen, female, 29, rural, lower class)

These issues for girls were not only limited to rural areas, they also confronted many challenges in urban areas. Most of our female participants highlighted the widespread harassment they face in their offices and on public transportation in cities. Zarmeen, a lower-class 22-year-old female from an urban area, stated, "Because of men harassing and groping girls on buses and vans, many families do not allow daughters to use public transport. This limits their ability to get the education or do any job."

While urban areas in Pakistan offer greater perceived opportunities for advancement, these advantages are nuanced by socioeconomic and regional disparities. Rural youth face a scarcity of opportunities beyond high school, leading to feelings of hopelessness and aligning with parental concerns over limited village resources hindering transitions to adulthood. Conversely, urban settings provide improved prospects for both genders, though they also bring challenges such as increased expenses, harassment, and prolonged commutes—all contributing to extended uncertainty and delayed traditional milestones. Notably, many participants highlighted 'time poverty,' particularly among women burdened with unequal household responsibilities, which limits their engagement in education or employment. These temporal constraints lead to strategic recalibrations, especially among affluent families, where young adults attempt to 'buy time' by delaying milestones like marriage or career commitments, thereby reshaping the timeline of adulthood and highlighting the interplay between economic resources and temporal autonomy.

6.3.1. Agency within structural limitations

Despite facing substantial structural barriers, a notable number of young individuals showcased considerable resourcefulness in adeptly maneuvering through familial and socio-cultural constraints. Our observations also uncovered a few instances of gradual shifts in certain gender norms. For instance, Bisma, a 29-year-old lower-class woman living in a small town, shared, "I got married at 28 after completing my education. My parents supported my decision to finish my MPhil, despite others thinking I should have married younger."

Bisma's experience exemplifies the negotiation of gender norms within a traditionally patriarchal society. Her choice to delay marriage until after her MPhil, supported by her parents despite social pressures, reflects a pivotal shift in the valuation of women's education. In a context where early marriage often supersedes education, particularly for lower-class women, Bisma's story signals a gradual but crucial transformation—where education is increasingly seen as a legitimate path to personal and professional fulfillment before marriage.

Similarly, some young people discussed how perspectives are shifting as older generations become more accepting of women pursuing professional goals before marriage. For instance, Waqar (28, lower income, urban) mentioned, "My sister is enrolled in an engineering degree and wishes to complete it before getting married. Our grandparents have now accepted girls' professional pursuits, even though they used to believe women should marry first."

Some parents also discussed becoming more open to their children's unconventional career paths based on their aspirations as an upper-class urban mother shared:

Seeing my son's interest and aptitude in music, I allowed him to leave university to pursue a career in composing and recording songs. In Pakistan, there are traditional expectations for children to have conventional careers, but I feel we must also consider their choices, skills, and interests. (Deeba)

These narratives reveal that socioeconomic class is pivotal in shaping how young people perceive and experience waitthood—either as an empowering phase of exploration or as a restrictive state marked by limited opportunities (Devgun et al., 2023). Such agency, though contingent, showcases a form of resilience whereby youth navigate

structural inequalities and negotiate their transitions to adulthood. Gender remains a salient axis of difference that mediates these transitions, shaping distinct expectations and pressures, as evidenced by Imran et al.'s (2020) discussion on gendered pathways to adulthood. Within this context, the capacity to delay conventional markers of adulthood reflects an evolving perspective, suggesting that despite entrenched barriers, there are emerging possibilities for young people to redefine their life course trajectories within the socio-cultural fabric of Pakistan.

7. Discussion

Our findings highlight how socioeconomic and cultural forces intersect with intergenerational relationships to shape youth experiences of waitthood in Pakistan, aligning with Honwana's (2014a) emphasis on extended transitions to adulthood. Consistent with Middle Eastern and African contexts, Pakistani youth often face prolonged family dependency and delayed attainment of adult milestones (Honwana, 2014b; Dhillon et al., 2009; Singerman, 2007). This interplay resonates with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional lens, revealing how overlapping social categories—particularly gender, class, and place—can either compound or alleviate constraints for youth navigating extended dependencies. By engaging the concept of “timepass” (Jeffrey, 2010), we show how young adults exert constrained agency in self-discovery, even as parental expectations around marriage and livelihood loom large. Importantly, parents reveal parallel tensions: while many encourage short-term exploratory pursuits, they still uphold norms dictating when and how youth should secure education, careers, and marriage.

Our data corroborate Jeffrey's (2008) depiction of waiting as both passive and strategic. Among affluent, urban families, parents can support extended periods of skill-building or career experimentation, enabling youth to treat waitthood as a phase of self-development. This echoes Ferrari and Pailhé's (2017) findings on class-based differentials, whereby resource-rich households buffer immediate pressures to assume adult roles. Conversely, limited options among lower-class families accentuate Kaplan et al., (2024) argument that economic precarity constrains upward mobility. In such contexts, parents are often torn between meeting basic needs and financing children's education, underscoring how household structure can both mitigate and perpetuate inequalities.

Gendered constraints further intertwine with parental perspectives on women's dual responsibilities in the domestic and public spheres (Meler & Marnin-Distelfeld, 2024; Athamneh & Benjamin, 2021). While parents increasingly value women's education as an avenue to upward mobility, these same families frequently reinforce early marriage expectations. This tension resonates with Bukhari et al.'s (2019) finding that men, too, confront societal ideals of breadwinning when economic constraints undermine stable employment. Parents of young men expressed mounting anxieties about masculine identities (Jeffrey & Young, 2012; Roy et al., 2022), suggesting that waitthood intensifies broader cultural dilemmas around manhood and provision.

Moreover, marriage remained a key marker of adulthood in these families, aligning with Joseph's (1994) analysis of patriarchal contexts in Lebanon and echoing Meler's (2021) findings on delayed marriage in Palestinian communities. Parents commonly gauge marriage readiness through material factors—such as dowry, housing, and stable income—as well as moral notions of the “right time” to wed (De Lannoy & Langa, 2021). In many cases, rising dowry demands deepen class and gender disparities by intertwining economic pressures with parental concerns over social standing. This dynamic not only underscores how financial obligations can stall the transition to adulthood but also sets the stage for broader discussions on how youth and parents negotiate these expectations.

Rural-urban inequalities further stratify these processes (Honwana, 2014b). Rural parents noted acute deficiencies in educational and

employment opportunities, making waitthood an imposed stasis. Meanwhile, their urban counterparts cited high living costs, safety concerns, and lack of affordable housing, reflecting Mitchell and Rentschler's (2016) argument that place-based constraints profoundly shape trajectories. Both youth and parents adapt to these challenges in localized ways, demonstrating how family support can either mitigate or entrench disparities (Imran et al., 2020).

Taken together, including parental views underscores how intergenerational relations channel and sometimes challenge societal prescriptions around education, marriage, and adulthood timing. While some parents reinforce conventional norms, others respond to changing socioeconomics by encouraging flexible strategies for their children. By foregrounding family ties within these intersectional contexts, our study also contributes to theoretical discussions of waitthood by highlighting that household-level negotiations shape the timing and meaning of delayed adulthood. Rather than viewing waitthood solely as an economic or social impasse, we illustrate how interdependence, relational agency, and structural inequalities intersect to produce diverse and sometimes transformative transitional experiences. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate how class, place, and gender collectively condition diverse expressions of waitthood in Pakistan.

7.1. Limitations and future directions

Some limitations of this study provide useful starting points for future research. At first, the cross-sectional data limits the understanding of transitions over time. Longitudinal research could fruitfully trace young adults' life trajectories through extended family interviews mapped onto evolving socioeconomic conditions. Second, supplementary interviews were conducted with parents only, leaving other family members behind, including grandparents and siblings. In-depth primary research on grandparental and sibling perspectives could offer enhanced insights into family dynamics, especially in collectivist societies (Stewart et al., 2003). Third, as an exploratory qualitative study, the findings are not generalizable to Pakistan's national youth population. For this, a carefully crafted quantitative survey using a representative sample would enable systematic comparisons of waitthood experiences across demographic variables. Lastly, only young adults currently co-residing with parents were included in this research, and future research could incorporate youth who have already left parental homes to comprehend post-waitthood experiences and evolving family relationships (Rubab et al., 2020).

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to advance theoretical understandings of waitthood as both a relational and intersectional phenomenon in Pakistan. By illuminating the interplay of familial relationships, structural barriers, and individual agency, we have demonstrated that delayed and often protracted transitions to adulthood are intricately shaped by overlapping inequalities of gender, class, and place, as well as by powerful cultural expectations around marriage and kinship obligations. Our data reveal how parental perspectives can both reinforce conventional norms and generate new possibilities. This also provides insight into the heterogeneity of youth trajectories. Consequently, the findings challenge interpretations of waitthood as either purely passive or solely structurally determined. Instead, we highlight how interdependent lives, financial constraints, and evolving aspirations jointly produce a complex landscape of waiting—one that incorporates both enduring patriarchal imperatives and emergent opportunities for change. We thereby contribute to broader debates in youth transitions and life course studies, suggesting that future research and policy initiatives engage with these multiple intersecting dimensions to support young adults' paths to autonomy and fulfillment more effectively.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Shah Rahat: Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sabir Imran:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Zaka Adeela:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of our manuscript, we utilized the OpenAI tool ChatGPT, for language improvement and correction of grammar. Being non-native English language speakers, this tool significantly aided us in enhancing the clarity and coherence of our ideas and concepts. It is important to note that the tool was exclusively used for language enhancement purposes. The content of the manuscript, including all concepts, arguments, and analyses, is entirely our own, and we take full responsibility for it. Furthermore, we have ensured that all the literature sources referenced in our work are properly cited and acknowledged. Following the use of ChatGPT, we have thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed to ensure it accurately reflects our research and findings.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors has no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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Statement of informed consent

The authors took informed consent from all the participants of the study.

Data availability

The data available for this study cannot be shared publicly due to ethical concerns or privacy of the research participants.

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