



Encroaching cities, enduring inequalities: navigating gendered land governance and symbolic violence amidst urban-encroachment and spatio-economic transitions in Peri-urban Pakistan

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Abstract This study explores the evolving dynamics of gendered land-governance amidst landscape and socio-economic transitions such as urban-encroachment. Despite forming 67% of the agricultural workforce, Women own just 4% of the land in Pakistan. With spatial and economic landscape transitioning from agriculture to an urban-industrial economy, a surge in land sales to the real-estate and development sector has been observed in Pakistan. This transition poses a fundamental threat to the economic security and agency of women, as they lack ownership and influence in land-transactions. Drawing on situational analysis of qualitative data from Rawalpindi city and its semi-urban villages in Northern-Punjab province, this study aims to advance the understanding of how symbolic violence perpetuates gendered exclusions in land distribution, explores the conditions and strategies through which women negotiate agency within structural constraints, and scrutinizes how simultaneous urban-encroachment and urbanization influence gender norms and land-governance. Expanding on frameworks of symbolic violence, relational autonomy, and gendered spatiality, the findings reveal that symbolic violence sustains women's exclusion by framing their marginalization as culturally-legitimate. Temporary matrifocal roles

enable limited autonomy, often fostering equitable resource-distribution, but remain constrained by systemic patriarchy. Moreover, urban-encroachment and urbanization introduces hybrid-governance systems intersecting statutory norms with traditional practices, yet patriarchal structures persistently adapt to maintain control. Nevertheless, urban influences spark modest attitudinal shifts signaling gradual transformative potential. By centering women's experiences, the findings imply the need for structural reforms, grassroots-mobilization, gender-sensitive policies and legal protections accompanied with cultural-shifts to address entrenched disparities and promote inclusive development in similar transitional contexts.

Keywords Peri-urban landscapes · Gender inequality · Inheritance · Landscape transitions · Matrifocality · Rural–urban dynamics

Introduction

Gender equality remains a cornerstone for sustainable development, punctuated by its direct implications for enhancing economic growth, reducing poverty and fostering social well-being (Patel, 2019). Despite global advancements, disparities in resource access, particularly environmental resources including land, a foundational asset, continue to be deeply skewed, with women and marginalized genders facing systemic exclusion (Agarwal, 2021; Azumah

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et al., 2023). Land ownership is vital not only for economic security but is a prerequisite for broader developmental outcomes. Extant literature points to the transformative potential of women's land ownership, linking it to enhanced agricultural productivity, better household welfare, and community resilience (Goli et al., 2025; Mishra & Sam, 2016; UN Women, 2020). However, achieving these goals necessitates tackling entrenched socio-cultural norms and legal limitations that present systematic barriers to women land ownership.

Being an agrarian country, land is a critical asset in Pakistan, supporting rural livelihoods and serving as a source of income, food, shelter and social identity. Presently, agriculture contributes nearly 19.4% of Pakistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs approximately 38.5% of the labor force, with women comprising a significant share (Pakistan economic survey, 2020). Being the third largest sector, and biggest contributor of GDP for over 2 decades, approximately 70% of Pakistan's population depends on agriculture for livelihood (Raza et al., 2023). However, for landowners, this utility of land is undergoing a significant transformation as urbanization and infrastructural development, particularly in peri-urban areas, commonly referred to as urban-encroachment, which is defined as the expansion of urban areas into previously agricultural or rural regions (Kumareswaran & Jayasinghe, 2023), have spurred increased interest in land for non-agricultural uses, particularly real-estate. Large-scale projects associated with initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the demand for urban housing have encouraged many landowners to re-evaluate land as a marketable-asset rather than solely a means of agricultural production (Qasim & Aslam, 2024).

These landscape transformations, while stimulating economic opportunities, promulgate existing gendered inequalities. In Pakistan, Women dominate the agricultural labor, constituting 67% of the agricultural workforce compared to only 28% men (World Bank, 2022), yet merely 4% of Women own the agricultural land and among these, only 11% possess decision-making power over their owned land (Ahmad & Khan, 2016; Zulfiqar, 2022). As per global literature, the mechanisms through which the affluent and elite assert dominance over land-ownership parallel the patriarchal structures that facilitate male-dominance

over women, enabling the inheritance and exploitation of land as a gendered privilege (Fonjong et al., 2013; Jain et al., 2023; Onyebueke et al., 2024a, 2024b). The trend is similar in Pakistan where laws theoretically grant women land rights, but the provisions are mostly overridden by socio-cultural customs that prioritize male heirs. This exclusion originates from social norms expecting women to transfer any inherited land to their brothers, husbands or sons, functionally disinheriting themselves (Parveen et al., 2022). Maqsood et al. (2024) have highlighted that such mechanisms not only deny women ownership but also limit their agency over land-use, as well as household decisions, forcing them into roles that prioritize unpaid labor over economic gain.

In the book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Vandana Shiva (2016) points that despite restricted ownership, women's interaction with land is fundamental to rural livelihoods. As primary food producers and household managers, women have an intimate understanding of ecological management and land productivity, often more so than their male counterparts. Yet, their contributions are undervalued, and their roles are dismissed as extensions of traditional responsibilities resulting in misrecognition of their roles (Waheed & Waheed, 2022). Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence extends a framework to understand this systemic marginalization. As societal norms normalize the exclusion of women and gender marginalized groups from landownership, disguising it as "natural", this normalization denies women agency, reinforcing their subordinate position in both social and familial. Thus, scrutinizing the interaction between patriarchal customs, legal frameworks, and economic transitions is critical, as it sheds light on how symbolic violence perpetuates gender disparities in land rights.

Furthermore, although the opportunities for women to manage or distribute land, in Pakistan's patriarchal society, are rare. But they often arise under exceptional circumstances, for instance becoming a widow or when male family-members are absent. Even in such situations, women typically act informally within socially prescribed roles. For instance, widows in rural areas may temporarily gain decision-making power over land-allocation for their children. However, this authority often operates within informal arrangements rather than as recognized legal ownership, underscoring the systemic barriers

women face in achieving equitable land rights (Haque et al., 2022; Tribune, 2024). Evidence suggest that marginalized groups, when provided decision-making power over resources, often seek to challenge systemic inequities. Relational autonomy, as theorized by Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000), highlights that individuals embedded in oppressive systems may practice agency by subverting prevailing norms in subtle ways. In context of Matrilocality, the social structures where women, particularly mothers, get prominent roles in familial organization (Tanner, 1974), specifically when male authority figures are absent, could manifest women distributing land more equitably or favoring daughters, reflecting an implicit resistance to gendered injustices. Likewise, theories of compensatory justice indicate that marginalized individuals might utilize limited authority to address historical power imbalances, allocating resources in ways that align with ideals of fairness (Rawls, 2016). These theoretical insights invite inquiry for the potential for women, when granted informal authority in land matters, to navigate and counteract patriarchal constraints creatively. However, how such practices might evolve generally in land-distribution and particularly in the context of urban-encroachment and land commodification, where formal patriarchal systems increasingly dominate, is not previously studied.

In addition, Pakistan exhibits complex migratory patterns due to urbanization, specifically in peri-urban villages (Rana & Bhatti, 2018). While, expanding cities engulf these villages into their peripheries, transforming traditional land uses; at the same time, migration from these rural areas to urban centers, led by better economic opportunities and proximity, has been a generational trend (Mukhtar et al., 2018). This simultaneous movement creates unique socio-economic dynamics that shape patterns of land-distribution and inheritance, where rural land, while physically unchanged, becomes subject to decision-making by two distinct groups: those who remain in villages and those who have migrated to urban centers but retain ownership to ancestral lands in the villages.

In this context, it is expected that decision-making about land distribution may differ between these groups. Rural residents, embedded in customary systems, might adhere to traditional norms prioritizing male heirs as noted by Zulfiqar (2022), while urban-influenced individuals, influenced by statutory frameworks, could marginally expand women's

opportunities but may also reproduce gender biases favoring economic capital, disproportionately benefiting men. Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus* explains how spaces socialize different expectations around land and gender, reinforcing inequities in unique ways (Sutherland et al., 2023). However, such changes are not guaranteed and remain unexplored in the literature, underscoring the importance of exploring these dynamics in evolving socio-economic landscapes to inform more inclusive land-governance policies.

Economic and landscape transitions, such as urban-encroachment, provide a critical lens for understanding how gendered inequities in land-governance evolve amidst social and spatio-economic change. These processes have potential to not only reshape traditional practices but also raise new spaces to investigate the intersections of gender, migration, and decision-making authority. Although previous research has inspected gender inequality in land ownership, much of it has centered on broader legal frameworks or socio-cultural barriers both in global (Agarwal, 2020; Bonye, 2022; Doss et al., 2015) and Pakistani context (Farooq, 2020; Fatima et al., 2024). However, the nuanced dynamics of how urban-encroachment and migratory patterns influence rural land-distribution remains largely unexplored, particularly in peri-urban contexts. Building on these considerations, this study is guided by the core question of how spatio-economic transitions, including urban-encroachment and land-commodification, interact with entrenched patriarchal norms to influence gendered dynamics in rural land distribution in Pakistan. This central inquiry is pursued through three more specific questions. The first investigates the ways in which symbolic violence normalizes gendered inheritance exclusions in land distribution. The second probes the conditions under which women, despite systemic exclusion, gain decision-making authority over land and how this authority is exercised. And the third examines the potential differences in land distribution decisions between rural residents adhering to traditional norms and urban-influenced individuals shaped by exposure to statutory frameworks and how simultaneous urban-encroachment and urbanization processes transform land-governance practices.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section situates this research within the socio-economic and spatial transformations of peri-urban Rawalpindi and outlines the historical and

contemporary forces that define gendered land distribution. This is followed by a conceptual framing that mainly integrates symbolic violence, legal pluralism, matrifocality, relational autonomy, and gendered spatiality to illuminate the multi-scalar mechanisms of exclusion and agency. The methodology section then details the purposive sampling strategy across rural and urban-influenced contexts, along with the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and the analytical approach. The results and discussion section presents key themes examining the interplay of patriarchal inheritance norms, women's agency within matrifocal contexts and the emergence of hybrid governance arrangements under simultaneous urbanization and urban-encroachment. The conclusion finally synthesizes the empirical and theoretical, demonstrating how integrating feminist theory with spatial and governance perspectives advances scholarly understandings of gendered land relations and offers actionable pathways for dismantling systemic inequities in contexts undergoing rapid socio-economic and spatial transformation.

Context of the study

Urbanization has emerged as an increasingly prevalent global phenomena, with urban populations steadily rising worldwide (Bratley & Ghoneim, 2018; Danegulu et al., 2024; Ding et al., 2025). In Pakistan this trend is particularly evident, as over the decades, urban population has grown substantially, rising from 17% in 1951 to 37% in 2010 and 39% in 2017 (Fahad et al., 2021), with projections indicating that within next 15 years, over 50% of Pakistan's population is expected to reside in urban areas (Marcotullio et al., 2008). To accommodate this fast growing urban populace and meet the accompanying infrastructural demands, rapid urban expansion is taking place. This

expansion ultimately manifests as urban-encroachment, where city boundaries absorb peri-urban and rural areas, transforming traditional agricultural lands into built-up spaces (Santicola, 2006). The peri-urban rural areas of Rawalpindi are facing similar situation since the last decade. With an estimated population of about 2 million inhabitants, Rawalpindi remains the fourth largest city of Pakistan, covers an area of 259 km² (Akram et al., 2015) and holds enhanced economic importance, given its USD 3.96 billion contribution to the USD 263.7 billion gross domestic product (GDP) of Pakistan (Marcotullio et al., 2008). The rapid transformation of agricultural land into built-up areas in this region is driven primarily by housing demand, infrastructure development and economic activity. A GIS and remote sensing analysis by Mannan et al. (2021) reveals that agricultural land in Rawalpindi between 1990 and 2020 has decreased by 65.60%, with an annual decline rate of 2.18%. Concurrently, built-up areas have seen an increase of 494.74% during the same time. These changes, detailed in Table 1, underscore the pace of urban expansion, redefining the socio-economic and environmental landscape of not only the city but also its surrounding rural areas.

Thus, the peri-urban areas of Rawalpindi, with their strategic location, as shown in Fig. 1, less than 60 km from the federal capital, have become prime targets for new housing societies and industrial zones (Qayyum et al., 2022). The Rawalpindi Ring Road Economic Corridor is a key driver of this expansion, encompassing a 65-km semi-circular road around the city. Complementing this, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further magnified the economic potential of the region, with aims to facilitate development across eight industrial and economic zones interspersed with logistical centers, health cities, and housing schemes, aligning with its broader infrastructural vision (The News, 2024).

Table 1 Land use changes (Mannan et al., 2021)

Land use	1990 (ha)	2020 (ha)	Total change (%)	Annual change (%)
Built-up area	2561.02	15,231.61	494.74	16.49
Forest land	4930.55	1973.82	−59.96	−1.99
Barren land	7156.52	2671.31	−62.67	−2.08
Agricultural land	8718.39	2999	−65.60	−2.18
Barren mountains	1291.87	2907.82	125.08	4.16
Water bodies	1242	117.18	−90.564	−3.018

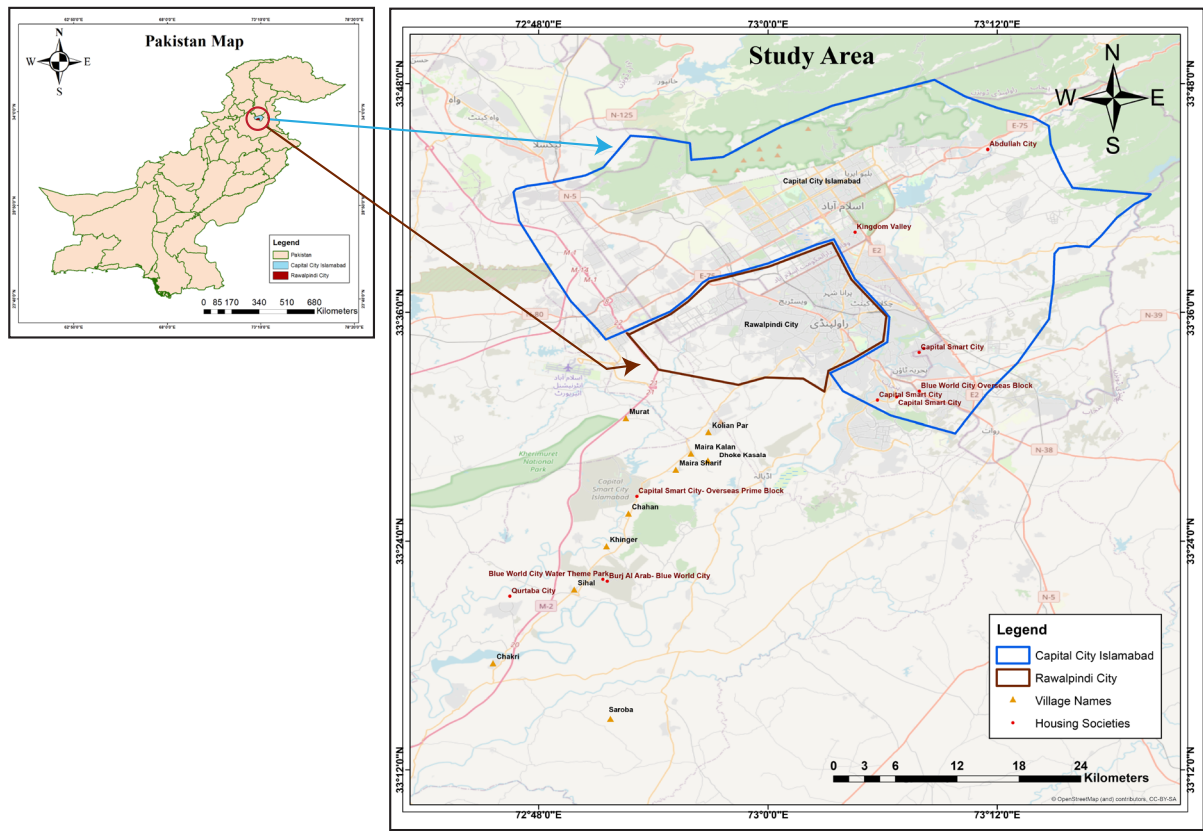


Fig. 1 Map showing the geographical location of the study area (Rawalpindi city, its peri-urban villages and newly establishing real-estate developments)

Notable developments include the high-profile Blue World City, which is collaborating with Chinese partners to construct 100,000 housing units alongside an economic zone featuring industrial hubs, a dry port, and Pakistan's largest cricket stadium with a 55,000 spectator's capacity (The News, 2024). Similar ventures, including Capital Smart City and Abdullah City, are also vying for space around the area, contributing to the region's urban-encroachment (Fig. 1). Collectively, these housing societies account for 16 approved housing societies covering over 5500 acres, with an additional 39 awaiting approval, representing a substantial 20% increase in Rawalpindi's built area, posing critical concerns regarding sustainability, governance and equity (Omer, 2021; Shahid, 2021). These projects have dramatically increased the value of land that was previously utilized for agriculture, which ultimately has led many landowners to sell their properties at significantly higher prices,

capitalizing on the soaring demand and making substantial profits.

While this expansion is framed as a gateway to economic growth and modernization, it also exacerbates gender inequities. Land transactions, often managed by men, primarily benefit them, sidelining women from decision-making processes and economic gains. This exclusion, embedded in cultural norms, reflects symbolic violence, where gender disparities are normalized and perpetuated under the guise of societal practices. In special circumstances, such as widowhood or the absence of male heirs, women may temporarily gain influence over land distribution. Yet, even in these instances, cultural expectations often compel them to act in ways that reinforce patriarchal norms. Additionally, Migratory trends from peri-urban to urban settings have also introduced new layers of complexity. While many long-time rural residents continue to

follow customary norms in land-governance, urban-influenced individuals, either recent migrants or those maintaining ancestral ties, often bring different expectations about land ownership and gender roles. These contrasts create a critical intersection of rural traditions and urban influences, reshaping land distribution practices in Rawalpindi's peri-urban areas.

The legal framework governing land inheritance in Pakistan operates within a pluralistic framework and is characterized by a complex interplay between formal legislation and informal customary practices (Zulfiqar, 2022). While the Constitution of Pakistan ensures right to acquire, hold, and dispose of property without discrimination, these rights are often bypassed by customary codes enforced by patriarchal local institutions. Local governance structures like Panchayats, are trusted over formal courts in rural communities and as these forums are male-dominated, they rarely consider women's claims to land. Moreover, land disputes in formal courts often take decades to resolve, further discouraging women from pursuing their inheritance claims (Shafqat & Zahir, 2016).

While, the 2011 Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, criminalizes the deprivation of women's inheritance rights under Section 498-A, critics argue that it remains limited in its impact as the law does not prevent women from relinquishing their inherited land to male relatives, which is often done under familial or social pressure (Rehman, 2024; Rubab, 2022). Consequently, while the legal framework facilitates women, its enforcement remains weak, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to dictate women's roles in land-governance. Islamic inheritance law further molds this legal landscape. Under Sunni law, women are entitled to inherit only half of what male heirs receive, a principle codified in Pakistan's Constitution. However, even these provisions are often overridden by socio-cultural practices that favor male inheritance, particularly in rural Pakistan, where women are expected to forfeit their inheritance claims to maintain family harmony (Latif, 2024). Most importantly, Pakistan's Constitution offers limited protections for women within the private sphere, such as familial inheritance disputes, as it absolves itself from directly addressing the systemic biases in household matters. This gap in constitutional protections enables customary practices to

bypass formal rights, further marginalizing women (Shafqat & Zahir, 2016).

Thus, in peri-urban Rawalpindi, the ongoing process of urban-encroachment offers a particularly compelling context for examining how these gendered exclusions persist amidst socio-economic and landscape transitions. Migratory trends and urban-encroachment are reshaping resource governance, potentially introducing new dynamics into decision-making. Similarly, in rare cases where women gain authority over land-allocation, there is an opportunity to explore how such transitions challenge or reproduce patriarchal norms. By situating these cultural and legal contexts within the framework of symbolic violence and migratory influences, this study seeks to understand the evolving gendered dynamics of Land-governance in Pakistan's rapidly transforming peri-urban spaces.

Conceptual and theoretical perspectives

More than just an economic asset, land ownership is a locus of power, identity and agency, thoroughly embedded in socio-cultural and gendered structures (Egah et al., 2023). Yet, across much of the 'Global South', including Pakistan, patriarchal norms systematically deny women access to this critical resource, normalizing their marginalization through legal and socio-cultural mechanisms (Agarwal, 1994; Ahmad et al., 2016). Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes, that such exclusions are rarely overt; instead, they operate through symbolic violence, rendering inequalities invisible while implanting them within the fabric of everyday life. As per this concept of Bourdieu (1991), symbolic violence as a form of non-physical violence is exerted through channels of cognition, communication, and recognition, reinforcing the asymmetry of power between social groups. It is deeply rooted in the daily life structures and is often misrecognized by both the dominant and subordinate groups.

Misrecognition, a key aspect of symbolic violence, occurs when power asymmetries are obscured by their normalization within socio-cultural norms. As Lusasi and Mwaseba (2020) highlight that misrecognition arises from habitual practices that attribute meaning to domination in ways that obscure its underlying power-dynamics, establishing norms where individuals accept their subjugation as

inevitably natural, cementing the inequalities. Scholars like Fraser (1998) and Holmes and McKenzie (2019) expand on this, explaining that misrecognition arises when institutionalized patterns of cultural value designate particular groups as inferior, thereby denying them ‘whole participation’ in social life, rendering these groups comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem, which effectively marginalizes them within society, as also explained by Honneth (1996). Charles Taylor ultimately explains that misrecognition can thus inflict harm by imprisoning such individuals in a distorted, false and reduced mode of being, as an individual’s identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence. Thus, by the misrecognition of others, an individual can suffer real damage. Specially, if their surroundings mirror back to them a confining, demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves (Taylor, 1995).

Land, transitioned from a resource to an economic commodity, can become a potential site where gendered inequalities are reproduced. While women’s roles are integral to agricultural productivity and family structures, their exclusion from land ownership and decision-making is perpetuated through socio-cultural norms that misrecognize their contributions as ancillary (Msofi Mgalamadzi et al., 2024). Urban-encroachment can exacerbate these dynamics by commodifying land, which further restricts women’s participation and agency in land transactions. Women’s exclusion from Land-governance and economic benefits is normalized through socio-cultural narratives that frame their subordination as virtuous and natural (Kandiyoti, 1988). This misrecognition not only sustains systemic inequalities but also ensures their reproduction across generations, reinforcing male dominance in both traditional and evolving socio-economic landscapes (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016). Despite its pervasive nature, symbolic violence can be challenged and disrupted when recognized as a mechanism of domination (Lusasi & Mwaseba, 2020; Uhlmann et al., 2002). However, any efforts often face resistance from dominant groups mainly because it challenges their authority.

Legal pluralism (Griffiths, 1986) provides a framework to examine how overlapping formal legal systems and informal customary practices in Land-governance systems perpetuate gendered exclusions while also offering potential spaces for contestation and reform. In Pakistan, as in many post-colonial

contexts, formal laws coexist with deeply entrenched customary norms and religious doctrines, creating a fragmented and often contradictory legal landscape (Yilmaz, 2019). This duality perpetuates patriarchal norms by privileging customary practices over statutory guarantees, thus reinforcing symbolic violence through the prioritization of male authority. Von Benda-Beckmann (2002) argues that legal pluralism, beyond the coexistence of legal orders, is also about the power-dynamics rooted in their interactions. These dynamics are specifically prominent in contexts where customary laws are invoked to legitimize male-centered decision-making processes, undermining women’s rights recognized under formal legal frameworks. As per Engle Merry (2012), in such systems, the existence of plural legal orders often introduce structural disadvantage for marginalized, as customary norms often misrecognize their contributions as non-existent or secondary and culminate in gendered exclusions from landownership. Furthermore, Sieder and Barrera (2017) points that recognition of multiple legal systems can result in selective enforcement, where patriarchal interpretations can exacerbate symbolic violence against disempowered further.

When discussing potential disruptors and reinforces of symbolic violence in Land-governance, the concepts of Matrilocality and Relational Autonomy can provide a lens for deepening this scrutiny. Matrilocality, as introduced by Smith (1996) introduces family structures centered around women, especially in absence of male-figures. Originally developed in the Afro-Caribbean context, matrilocality has been extended to explore women’s roles in several patriarchal settings where they temporarily take-on decision-making position (Jackson, 2015; Medeiros, 2023; Safa, 2008). In given scenarios, matrifocal arrangements may or may not dismantle male-dominated systems but can potentially offer marginalized the opportunity to navigate or reshape them. Chant (2007) discusses that matrilocality can provide margins for women to exercise authority, however, this authority is often context-dependent, contingent and rarely translates into structural-shifts in gender relations. Mackenzie and Stoljar’s (2000) relational autonomy, rooted in feminist ethics, complements matrilocality by offering a framework to scrutinize how women’s decisions are influenced by contextual constraints and social relations. Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) challenge the notion of individualistic

autonomy, suggesting instead that autonomy is relational, evolved by interdependent networks of relationships. In contexts of symbolic violence, relational autonomy extends an alternate perspective on how agency of underprivileged groups is exercised within, and sometimes against, androcentric structures (Roest et al., 2023). In patriarchal context, under exceptional circumstances, such as widowhood or the migration of male family members for employment, women in matrifocal households, for instance, may navigate their relational autonomy by simultaneously accommodating and resisting socio-cultural expectations. Such duality demonstrates notion of negotiated autonomy (Donchin, 2001), where agency is enacted through compromises that consider communal and familial dynamics. This interplay highlights the duality of matrifocality as both a site of resistance and systemic constraints. Thus, the intersection of matrifocality and relational autonomy, provides an additional theoretical lens to analyse how women's engagement with land is not merely reactive but actively mediated by their socio-cultural roles and relational contexts.

Adding an additional layer to the above mentioned frameworks, Massey's work on Gendered spatiality (1994) can be helpful in explaining if the physical and symbolic reconfiguration of spaces through urban-encroachment and urban migratory patterns reinforces or challenges existing power dynamics. Massey (1994) argues that spaces are not static or neutral entities but are socially constructed and imbued with underlying power-dynamics that may reflect and reinforce gender hierarchies through spatial practices and control. In peri-urban context, particularly in developing world, as noted by Follmann (2022), the rapid urban-expansion creates hybrid spaces where traditional rural practices that prioritize male lineage intersect with urban statutory-frameworks. Such transitions not only alter physical landscapes but also reconfigure the symbolic meanings attached to land and its ownership (Babalola et al., 2024; Wolff et al., 2021), thus, introducing new complexities, where women's land inheritance remains constrained by both the persistence of rural norms and the limitations of urban socio-legal structures (Doss et al., 2014; Massey, 1994). These spatial transformations have potential to create opportunities for contestation and adaptation, enabling evolved equitable practices but rarely leading to dismantle patriarchal foundations. According to Ayitio (2019), exposure to

urban statutory norms can induce practices such as joint ownership or formal inheritance claims. However, such shifts are often hindered by the continued dominance of rural patriarchal customs, establishing hybrid governance structures that are neither fully urban nor entirely rural.

Lamont and Molnár's (2002), concept of boundary work complements this perspective by investigating how symbolic and cultural boundaries are negotiated and maintained in transitional spaces where often the urban-rural boundary is as much ideological as physical, deciding how governance systems adapt to socio-economic changes. So former rural individuals who are now migrants to urban centers, but retain rural land ownership, often bring modernized gender norms into rural settings. However, as Lamont and Molnár (2002) highlight, boundary work frequently reinforces existing exclusions, as patriarchal structures adapt to maintain control over Land-governance. While urbanization may provide opportunities for women to assert greater autonomy in land-related decisions, these opportunities are often constrained by enduring socio-cultural biases (Walker, 2003). This interplay showcases the resilience of conventional norms, even within ostensibly progressive transitions. Gendered spatiality and boundary work also help to understand how transitional spaces affect women's ability to navigate hybrid governance systems. As Chigbu (2019) explain, in peri-urban contexts, women majorly rely on relational networks to negotiate informal land rights, but as these negotiations are mediated by male relatives, thus, reinforcing the symbolic dominance of men. The interplay of these factors underscores the significance of examining symbolic and spatial boundaries that shape gendered access to land, particularly in regions witnessing urban-encroachment and socio-economic transformations.

Methodology

Research setting

The research was conducted in peri-urban villages of Rawalpindi and parts of Rawalpindi city, located in the northern part of Punjab province in Pakistan (Fig. 1). Covering an area of around 259 km² (Akram et al., 2015), Rawalpindi is undergoing rapid

urban-encroachment, extending its boundaries to gulp the surrounding rural areas due to large-scale infrastructure projects and real estate developments. Located less than 60 km from the federal capital of Islamabad, Rawalpindi's peri-urban areas serve as a focal point for housing societies, industrial hubs, and infrastructural expansions, including projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Qayyum et al., 2022). These transformations have led to the large-scale conversion of agricultural land into built-up areas, providing a rationale to choose peri-urban areas of Rawalpindi to study the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of gendered land-governance amidst urbanization. Furthermore, Rawalpindi city, as a growing urban center, offers a vital comparative perspective, particularly for scrutinizing how urban influences shape rural land-governance and gendered decision-making practices. Within peri-urban Rawalpindi, we selected 10 villages: *Kolian Par, Moorat, Maira Kalan, Dhoke Kasala, Maira Sharif, Chahan, Khingar, Sihal, Chakri and Saroba*, chosen due to their active engagement in land transactions and varying degrees of urban encroachment (Fig. 1). One of the central rationales of this research was the unprecedented and contested scale of such encroachment. As previously mentioned, the Official Rawalpindi Development Authority (RDA) records list more than 16 large-scale housing societies as approved, over 30 awaiting approval, and more than 50 operating without formal authorization (Rawalpindi Development Authority, n.d). Discrepancies between official figures and local accounts further complicate the extent of land-commodification. To give an example from one of the chosen sites, Capital Smart City housing society's documentation states that it is sprawled over 65,000 kanals (Capital Smart City, n.d), whereas RDA reports its official approval of 7376 kanals, with a 17,602-kanal extension under review. Local land record keepers and other independent sources provide contradictory estimates of the actual area, ranging from 150,000 to 160,000 kanals (Jaga, 2025; Lahore Real Estate, 2025; Rawalpindi Development Authority, n.d). Such discrepancies arise from a combination of phased project approvals, fragmented land registration processes, and informal or anticipatory land sales preceding formal authorization. Our site selection remained Sensitive to these uncertainties; thus, village selection was based on triangulated evidence from RDA planning documents, land records

of housing societies themselves, and key informant insights. As peri-urban Rawalpindi areas in our study comprised approximately 25–30 villages, yet exact counts vary due to shifting administrative boundaries and contested definitions of peri-urban space. Based on this, 10 above stated villages were chosen to capture variation in proximity to significant developments (as shown in Fig. 1), stage of agricultural-to-urban land conversion, and the degree of engagement with urban land markets. This approach ensured that the study achieved conceptual representativeness across varied encroachment contexts, in line with the study's qualitative design.

Additionally, situating the study in Rawalpindi city, enabled us to include recent migrants and long-term urban dwellers who maintain ties to their ancestral rural lands. This dual focus enabled the study to capture the interplay between urban and rural norms, particularly in land distribution and inheritance practices.

Research design, procedures and sampling

The research employed qualitative case-study approach utilizing data collection through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The approach was used to seek a deep understanding of a specific phenomenon and present findings that authentically capture respondent's experiences and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The population comprised respondents from 10 villages and Rawalpindi city. These locations were chosen due to the pronounced impact of urban-encroachment as detailed in previous section. The sample was purposively selected to ensure diversity in socio-economic background, family structures and connection to land-related decision-making processes. Here, socio-economic status was operationalized using a composite of: (1) self-reported monthly household income bands; (2) extent of land ownership (measured in kanals), and (3) primary source of livelihood (agriculture, business, salaried employment, or daily wage). Family structures were classified as nuclear, joint, or extended households. While connection to land-related decision-making was defined as either direct, where the participant personally made or actively influenced decisions on land inheritance, sale, or management (including temporary authority arising from matrifocal

contexts), or indirect, where the participant did not make such decisions but was closely affected by them. To maintain diversity across these categories, sample composition was reviewed iteratively during fieldwork. The distribution of participants across these categories is summarized in Table 2.

Respondents from peri-urban villages were identified through collaboration with local women's support groups and community networks and included women affected by land transactions, landowners, and women who had gained temporary decision-making authority under exceptional circumstances, such as widowhood or the absence of male heirs. Recruiting women required culturally sensitive approach and establishing trust, which was ensured by engaging with informal women's gatherings. Here, it is crucial to recognize that despite participants being recruited through multiple entry-points, individuals less connected to these channels, particularly women with limited mobility or minimal community engagement, may be under-represented. This possibility reflects a broader structural reality in which social isolation often overlaps with exclusion from land-related decision-making, which makes such perspectives more challenging to capture within the temporal and logistical parameters of the study. The study sought to mitigate this risk by diversifying recruitment pathways, though it cannot be entirely eliminated in contexts where

women's participation in public and community life is often constrained.

As for urban respondents, inclusion required both current residence in the city and involvement in rural land transactions. Here, initial contact was facilitated by village elders or *Patwaris*, local record keepers and intermediaries who maintain land ownership records and oversee sale documentation. Land transactions, in the context of rural Pakistan, cannot ordinarily proceed without their facilitation (Rahman, 2024), making them pivotal entry points to identify eligible participants. However, this reliance was not exclusive as recruitment was complemented by snow-ball sampling, which minimized potential selection bias towards highly networked community members.

In total 68 participants were approached for the interviews. However, thematic analysis revealed that data saturation had been reached after the 31st interview. Here data saturation was assessed using Guest et al's (2006) approach and was operationalized as the point at which three consecutive interviews within each purposively defined diversity group yielded no new codes or substantive expansion to existing thematic categories. The diversity groups included gender, socio-economic status and connection to land related decision making. An additional five interviews were conducted to confirm data saturation which further validated that the research had comprehensively captured the necessary perspectives. Consequently, the interviews were concluded at 36 respondents. While this approach supports confidence in data adequacy, it is acknowledged that saturation remains a judgment-driven and context-specific construct as Braun and Clarke (2021) argue, and cannot be equated with exhaustive completeness. Nelson (2017) suggests notion of "conceptual depth" as an alternative, where the adequacy of the data is further judged by its capacity to support sufficient depth and coherence to address the research questions with confidence. Our dataset met this standard as well.

As noted by Weber et al. (2021), when data is collected with the head of the household as the primary respondent, there is a tendency to hear more from men than from women which can lead to the under-representation of women's perspectives. Thus the disproportionate emphasis on women in the study reflected the research's objective to amplify voices that are often marginalized in land-governance discourse. Furthermore, men and women, if from same

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of participants

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	23	63.8
	Male	13	36.1
Location	Peri-urban Villages	24	66.6
	Rawalpindi City	12	33.3
Socio-economic status	Low	10	27.7
	Middle	18	50
	High	8	22.2
Connection to land-related decision-making	Direct	21	58.3
	Indirect	15	41.6
Family structure	Nuclear	9	25
	Joint	19	52.7
	Extended	8	22.2

family, were interviewed separately so women could freely express their views.

The interviews were situational in nature, tailored to the roles and experiences of respondents. Interview checklist with women consisted of questions on inheritance practices, the socio-cultural constraints they faced, and their decision-making opportunities in special circumstances. For men, the interviews questioned their roles as decision-makers, perspectives on women's land ownership and their perceptions on the intersection of urbanization and traditional norms. Each interview took nearly an hour to complete and were done in local languages i.e. Punjabi and Urdu and later transcribed to English. Due to the researcher's familiarization with the local languages and customs, they did not rely on interpreters who might fail to fully understand or translate key terms. Moreover, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) complemented the interviews, ensuring collective insights into community-level dynamics. Two FGDs were conducted, one in peri-urban villages and another in the city with eight women each recruited through convenient sampling. As during the interviews, majority of men dismissed women's knowledge, claiming they were uninformed, reflecting a pattern of 'Othering' that undermines women's agency (Kandiyoti, 1988) as also noted by Lusasi and Mwaseba (2020). Thus, we excluded men from FGDs, which helped to enhance their epistemic agency, allowing them to express more openly (Harding, 2004). The FGDs revolved around themes including the challenges of equitable land distribution, the role of patriarchal norms in inheritance practices and the implications of urban-encroachment for gender equity. Both interviews and FGDs adhered to strict ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all respondents and confidentiality ensured throughout. Special attention was given to culturally sensitive engagement, particularly with women, by establishing private and comfortable settings for discussions. The research minimized power imbalances during data collection, ensuring participants felt safe while sharing sensitive information.

Analysis

The study employed situational analysis to analyze the data, which is particularly suited for deciphering the complexities of social phenomena by integrating

context, relationships, and power dynamics into the analysis (Clarke, 2005). This approach enabled us to holistically examine ways in which urban-encroachment reshapes gender dynamics, material landscapes and socio-cultural meanings attached to land. Firstly, the interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim to identify key concepts, make cross-case comparisons and organize the data into first order concepts. Open coding ensured that in addition to pre-determined themes, new themes could also emerge inductively. Codes adhered to respondent's terminology to ensure authenticity. This iterative coding approach allowed for the exploration of insights grounded in respondent's lived experiences while minimizing the researcher bias imposition (Charmaz, 2014). Secondly, emerging concepts were organized into broader, more abstract second-order themes. Which were finally further distilled into aggregate dimensions to provide a coherent structure to the analysis, following the method outlined by Gioia et al. (2013). This systematic process ensured theoretical rigor and clarity in linking empirical findings to broader conceptual frameworks. The initial reading of the transcripts produced 141 first order concepts, which were consolidated into 46 second order themes and 17 aggregate dimensions. Further review refined them, reducing the first order concepts to 44, the second order themes to 13, and 3 aggregate dimensions which are shown as Figs. 2, 3 and 4, along with the overall results. It is to be noted here that the Figs. 2, 3, and 4 are aggregate visual representations developed from the complete dataset, encompassing all interviews and focus group discussions. Consistent with the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), these figures display the progression from first-order concepts to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, capturing patterns and relationships identified across the full set of participants and this method of visual representation aligns with established qualitative research practice (Akullo et al., 2024; Engen et al., 2021; Gioia et al., 2013; Zulfiqar, 2022). The refining and distilling of the data enhanced the alignment between the raw data and the emergent theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2013).

Findings and discussion

Symbolic violence and the inheritance of inequality

Symbolic violence as per Bourdieu (1991) refers to the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms through which

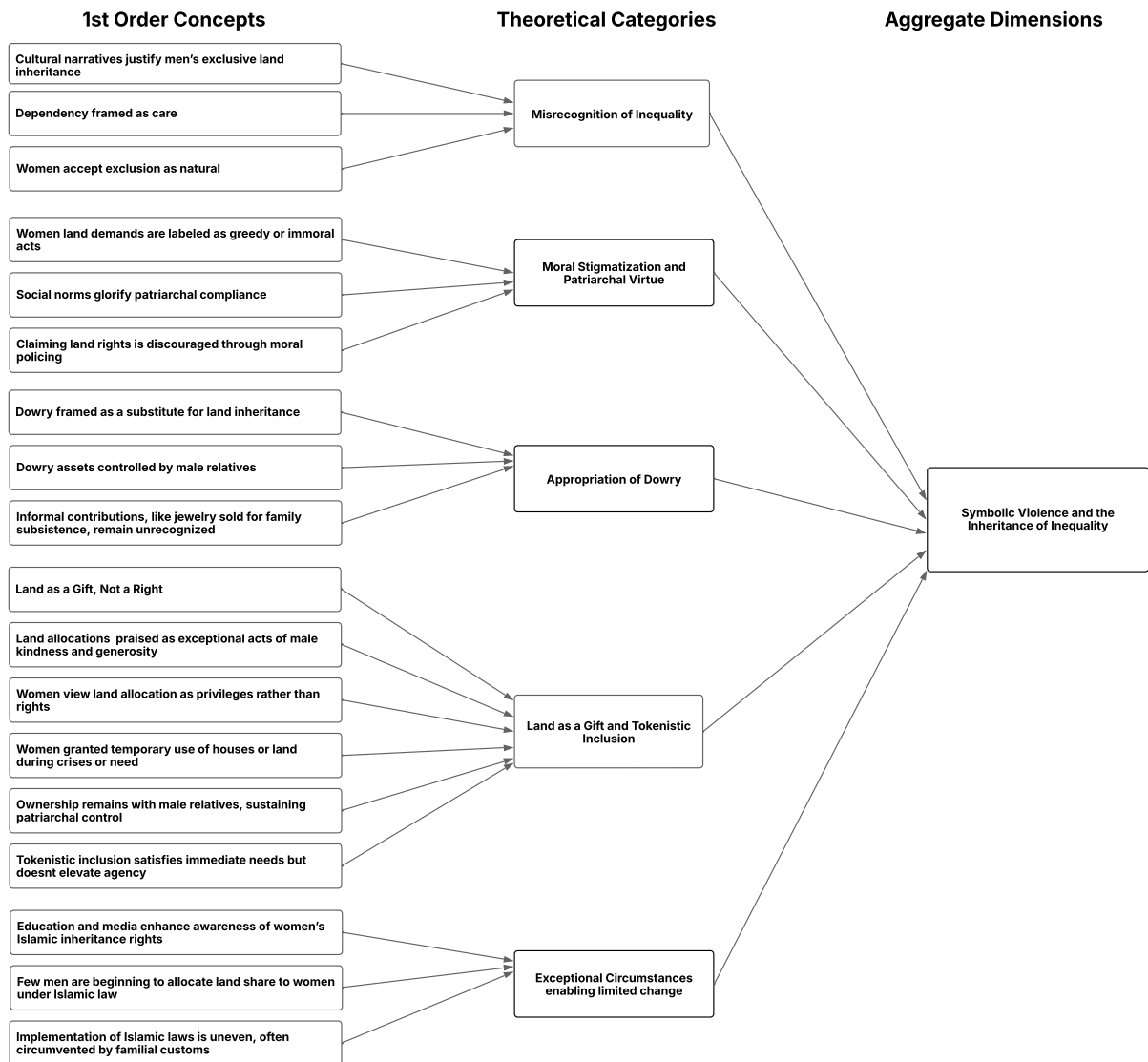


Fig. 2 Thematic structure for the aggregate dimension of symbolic violence and the inheritance of inequality

domination is normalized and misrecognized as natural within socio-cultural norms. In the context of urban-encroachment, our findings reveal that symbolic violence operates through deeply entrenched patriarchal practices that systematically exclude women from land ownership and decision-making, enrooting these inequities into the social fabric. The thematic structure of these dynamics is shown in Fig. 2.

The socio-cultural narrative depicting land as the rightful domain of men, rationalizing women's

exclusion through reasoning of lineage continuity was a prominent theme in both interviews and focus groups. One woman from *Maira Kalan* noted:

'I know that we [women] do not inherit land because we leave the family after marriage. My husband will take care of me then. Land is for sons to continue the family legacy.'

This rationale reflects a system of patriarchy that equates inheritance with the continuity of male lineage, rendering women's rights to land secondary to familial traditions, which aligns with the broader

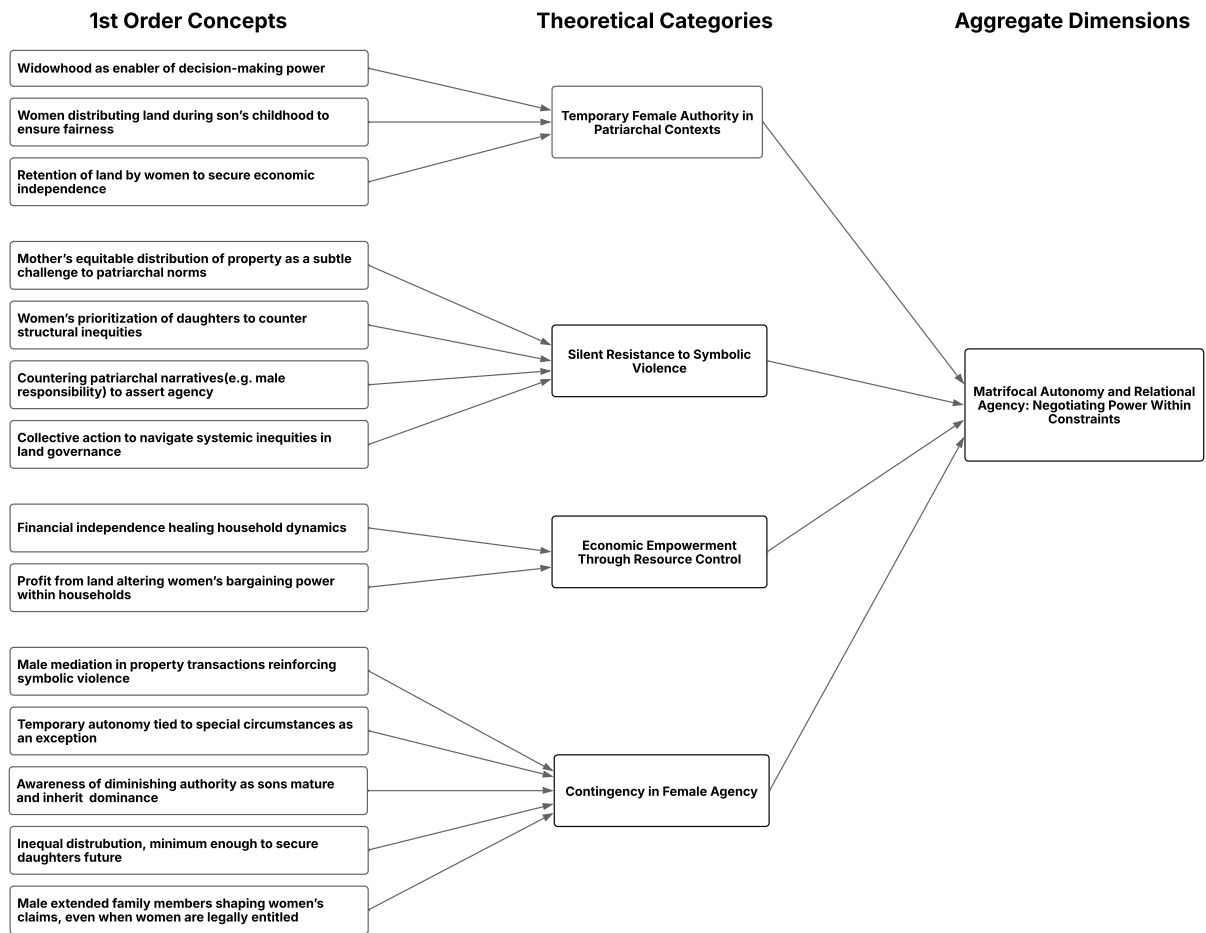


Fig. 3 Thematic Structure for the Aggregate Dimension of Matrifocal Autonomy and Relational Agency: Negotiating Power Within Constraints

feminist critiques of inheritance systems as mechanisms that institutionalize gender inequality (Agarwal, 1994; Shiva & Mies, 2014). In rural Pakistan, like in most south Asian contexts, land is not only an economic asset but is also a potent symbol of power, social status and authority. Inheriting land to women is perceived as a transfer of power to another family due to marriage, disrupting the structure that privileges male dominance. Kandiyoti (1988) framework of “patriarchal bargains” explains this, that women often navigate such systems by accepting subordinate roles to secure familial stability. The socio-cultural logic that land must remain within the patrilineal lineage guarantees that inheritance becomes an apparatus for preserving male-centered power structures. This hindrance is further magnified in rural contexts,

where systems are ingrained in agrarian traditions, thus land ownership becomes critical to sustain community status (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). These exclusionary norms not only deny women economic agency but also perpetuates their dependency on male relatives.

On a similar note, male respondents framed women’s dependency as a moral justification for taking their land for themselves. One man from *Khingar* remarked, “A woman is a man’s responsibility. When we already provide for her needs, what is she going to do with money or land?” This encapsulates symbolic violence’s misrecognition aspect, where male control is framed as protection or care, hiding the underlying power asymmetries. This ‘protectionist’ rhetoric, as per Agarwal (1994), while framed as benevolence,

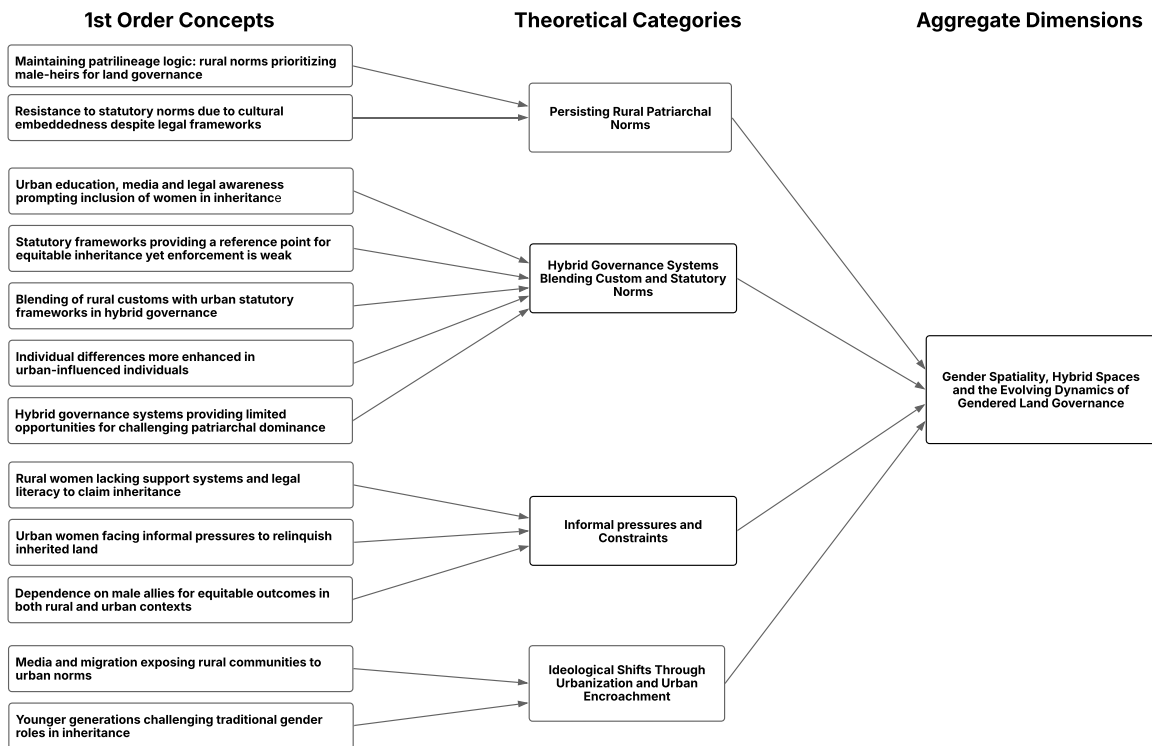


Fig. 4 Thematic structure for the aggregate dimension of gender spatiality, hybrid spaces and the evolving dynamics of gendered land-governance

directs to preserve male dominance over assets. As one woman from *Sihal* observed:

‘When they [men] say women are men’s responsibility, they only mean providing food. Many other responsibilities are not even recognized by them.’

Thus, such paternalistic models of resource distribution expose the inherent contradictions in the benevolence argument, revealing that such narratives prioritize control over empowerment, obscuring the structural inequities women face (Elson, 1995; Fraser, 2014).

Another justification for patriarchal customs reinforcing male authority was dowry as a substitute for land inheritance. A male respondent argued, “Women get their share in family wealth at time of marriage with gold, furniture, and other things for her and her in-laws.” Yet, dowry assets, although nominally belong to women, they are seldom within their control. Several women respondents in focus group shared instances where their gold jewelry, ostensibly

their property, was sold by male relatives for family needs. One woman from *Saroba* recounted, “When my husband sold my jewelry to build our house, I didn’t object”. When asked if she got a shared ownership of the house, she replied: “Whatever is his is mine too, so what I demand shared ownership for?”. This explains that symbolic violence suppresses women’s economic agency by obscuring their exclusion under the guise of familial unity.

Similar normalization of inequities was additionally apparent in women’s hesitance to claim land rights. When inquired why they did not demanded share in land recently sold, one woman from *Dhoke Kasala* just laughed as mere possibility of this happening would be just a laughable joke. Another respondent from the same village said, “My brother has a family to feed; he has more responsibilities than me and really needs the money from land sale.” These statements illustrate the internalization of patriarchal norms, where women justify and uphold their exclusion as a natural extension of men’s greater societal responsibilities. Thus this misrecognition augments the barriers women face, as their needs

and labor contributions are made invisible within societal narratives as also noted in Schneider's (2014) work on kinship and property transfer. This overarches beyond economic dimensions, as it prolongs the invisibility of women's contributions to household wealth, a trend also prominent in Sen's (1990) analysis of intra-household dynamics and inequality.

Furthermore, the moral framing of women's silence around inheritance as virtuous further deepens symbolic violence. Women who demand their right to land are often labeled as disrespectful and morally corrupt. One respondent said, *"If I demand my share, people will say I am greedy and have no respect for my elders and family."* Even when demands for land rights arise, they are mostly voiced by male relatives on behalf of women, further disempowering them. One woman from Maira Kalan said:

'When my husband and sons heard that my brother's land was sold for high rates, they demanded my share from my brother on my behalf. I was very embarrassed in front of my brother.'

In such cases even if the women get their share, it will be transferred from one male relative to another, not empowering women in any case, as also argued by Rao (2011). This potentially establishes what Acker (1990) has referred to as 'all-male enclaves' functioning on a masculine ethic (Zulfiqar, 2022).

Interestingly, few male respondents described when they voluntarily allocated resources to their daughters or sisters as acts of generosity. A woman from Chahan shared:

'When my brother sold our land, he purchased four houses with the money and gave me one. He is very kind-hearted.'

Similarly, another respondent from Chakri explained:

'When my husband was going through financial tough times, my brother gave us a house from his several houses to live in. In this way, he always helps me when I need.'

Such acts, framed as gifts or help rather than rights, further highlight that even when women's needs are met informally, these solutions do not necessarily translate into formal ownership or enhanced agency. Sharma (1984) critiques such 'patriarchal

gift economies', as women's dependence on men is reinforced through such discretionary transfers, perpetuating the notion that women's financial needs are subordinate to male authority, reproducing the systemic denial of formal ownership. Which ultimately curbs their independent decision making to negotiate power within and beyond households (Goody, 1976).

Amidst these persistent inequities, very few of respondents noted gradual shifts in attitudes, driven by education and media awareness. A minority of men now allocate share of land sales to their sisters in accordance with Islamic law. A respondent from Chakri reported, *"My brother gave me half of the money from his recently sold land. He said it was my Sharai (Islamic) right. This is rare, but is happening now."* While these cases remain isolated, they point a potential avenue for challenging symbolic violence and stimulating equitable practices and aligns with broader global trends, where socio-cultural transformations often emerge due to awareness campaigns and access to education (Shrestha et al., 2020). However, such phenomenon must be critically examined within the framework of symbolic violence. While such actions although appear to challenge gender inequities, but are often remain framed as moral choices rather than obligations, which continues to reflect and reinforce male authority as already discussed. As scholars like Firestone (2003) and Kandiyoti (1988) argue, such practices can simultaneously validate existing hierarchies while contributing incremental progress. By positioning these shifts as individual choices, rather than systemic requirements, patriarchal norms subtly adapt to maintain dominance even amidst change. This reflects the adaptability of symbolic violence, where progress becomes a contraption for maintaining control instead of dismantling it (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991; Ortner, 2006).

Matrifocal autonomy and relational agency:
negotiating power within constraints

One of the principal research questions guiding this research examined how matrifocality and relational autonomy manifest within patriarchal structures during times of land and economic transitions, particularly in phases of temporary female authority such as widowhood or when sons are too young to take

charge. This inquiry is essential to understanding how marginalized individuals navigate, resist, or sometimes reinforce symbolic violence within contexts influenced by transitioning socio-economic factors. The structured themes emerged from data, representing these patterns are outlined in Fig. 3.

The findings suggest that while matrifocality resists symbolic violence, such resistance is subtle and embedded in personal-actions instead of overt-defiance. One widow from *Murat* explained:

‘When I sold my deceased husband’s property recently, I divided the money equally between my two sons and my daughter, so that they all get something to secure their future.’

In Islamic law if a widow has no children, she is entitled to a quarter of her deceased husband’s assets while she gets one eighth if she has children (Abbasi, 2024). Interestingly, women understood the exclusionary systems and when had authority, defied them. The same woman, instead of settling for conventional one eighth, retained an equal share for herself, stating, “*When my husband was alive, he was responsible for my subsistence, but now I don’t want to be necessitous on my children, especially when I get older.*” By asserting her rights, she rejected customary norms without directly challenging them. This finding reverberates with James Scott (1985) concept of “everyday resistance”, which delineates that marginalized groups counter domination not through open-rebellion but through mundane acts that subvert the status quo. These acts which Jagger, (2019) calls “symbolic resistance” allows the marginalized to assert their autonomy while avoiding the social costs associated with overt challenges to authority. Such silent resistance contradicts men’s narratives, which use their ‘provider-role’ as an excuse to take-over women’s land share. Women in matrifocal roles appropriated this narrative instead, to justify their agency. This re-framing exemplifies Fraser’s (2009) “counter-hegemonic discourses,” where subordinated individuals reconfigure dominant narratives to empower themselves and negotiate their place within oppressive systems. Thus, the same widow’s action to secure her subsistence disrupts the notion of women’s dependency, highlighting the empowering potential of economic resources in resisting symbolic violence.

Related to this, economic independence emerged as a vital outcome of such practices, with substantial

implications for women’s agency. A woman from *Kolian Par* recounted:

‘My in-laws and husband used to be disrespectful to me and my daughter, but since my mother gave me my share of the land she sold, I receive a monthly profit from my bank. Money has power; my position is changed now in front of my in-laws and they don’t treat me the way they used to.’

Another woman from *Rawalpindi* city during FGD noted a similar transformation:

‘My husband used to give me three thousand rupees a month for monthly spending for myself and my daughter which were not enough. We used to fight over expenses all the time. He used to say when I pay all bills and groceries than what more personal expense can you have? Now, with the rent from the house my mother gave me, I get forty thousand from the rent. Me and my husband no more fight over expenses.’

These narratives illustrate the role of financial independence in reshaping power dynamics within patriarchal family structures, reinforcing Yu’s (2024) assertion that economic ownership amplify women’s bargaining power by providing symbolic and material autonomy. As per Kabeer’s (1999) framework of empowerment, resources expand women’s agency to challenge inequitable power dynamics. However, as Mies (2014) critiques, asset ownership majorly reconfigures rather than dismantles domination relations. Thus, economic independence fosters substantial shifts in household dynamics, but patriarchal dominance remains normalized, consistent with Cornwall’s (2001) argument that empowerment operates within the limits of entrenched gender ideologies.

Solidarity among women emerged as another dimension of matrifocal authority. A widow from *Chahan* shared how her sister supported her during her crisis, “*When I had no place to go after my husband’s death, my sister, who is well-off, gave me her share from our ancestral property. Together, we bought a small house for me.*” Such acts of solidarity underscore that women often navigate structural inequities collectively, resisting systemic barriers through mutual support (Mohanty, 2003). However, these practices often exist within the constraints of patriarchal norms as while women take on roles

that challenge the status quo, they simultaneously reinforce patriarchal narratives. One woman from *Maira Kalan* gave account of her mother's property distribution:

'My mother bought me and my sister one house each, but my brothers got multiple houses and land because, she said, I gave you enough for your future security and subsistence but your brothers have a house to run.'

This allocation showcases the pervasive influence of symbolic violence, where even women in positions of authority reproduce patriarchal values under the guise of fairness. The contingent nature of female autonomy also became evident in their interactions with patriarchal systems. One respondent from *Maira Sharif* complained how she relied on her brother to sell property, stating;

'As a woman, they wouldn't give me a fair rate. But my brother gave more valuable land to my older daughter, who is betrothed to his son, and less valuable land to my younger daughter.'

This finding is a practical reflection of Mackenzie and Stoljar's (2000) relational autonomy concept which suggests that a woman may make decisions that reflect her autonomy but must simultaneously navigate the expectations and approval of extended male relatives, reinforcing the persistence of symbolic violence even within matrifocal contexts.

The temporal limitation of female authority was another recurring theme. A widow from *Saroba* explained:

'I gave my daughters their shares early as I understand once my sons get mature, they won't give much to their sisters. That's what happens here.'

This acknowledgment reflects an acute awareness of their autonomy's temporal limitations. Women navigate such limitations tactically, ensuring some measure of equity before losing complete influence to entrenched patriarchal norms which is consistent with Onyebueke et al., (2024a, 2024b) findings which also report women employing "maternal manoeuvres" to navigate restrictive customary systems and secure resources for their daughters in Nigerian context.

These findings encapsulate the duality of matrifocal authority during urban-encroachments. As they

extend a space for women to assert agency and resist symbolic violence. At the same time, they are never obsolete and are constrained by systemic inequities that prioritize male authority, framing women's actions as temporary deviations rather than systemic shifts (Gram et al., 2018; Kandiyoti, 1988).

Gender spatiality, hybrid spaces and the evolving dynamics of gendered land-governance

Urban-encroachment and urbanization have introduced new dynamics to land distribution practices, creating an interplay between traditional norms and evolving statutory frameworks. This section explores how simultaneous urban-encroachment and urbanization challenges traditional land-governance practices while reproducing symbolic violence through evolving but constrained norms. The thematic structure of these evolving dynamics is illustrated in Fig. 4.

The findings unveil that urbanization does not simply overwrite traditional practices but merges them with emerging urban-norms, inducing hybrid governance systems. Clear divergence was noted between rural and urban-influenced land distribution patterns, shaped by different socio-cultural norms and exposure to statutory frameworks. In peri-urban villages, land remains a deeply symbolic resource tied to patrilineal lineage and male authority. Respondents from villages consistently stressed that adherence to customary practices favoring male heirs was fundamental for maintaining family status, as already discussed, underscoring the patriarchal logic that establishes land as instrument for consolidating male authority (Khalid et al., 2015).

However, urban influences are beginning to disrupt these patterns. Urban respondents who had migrated to cities and are raised there, demonstrated more progressive approach to land distribution. Many urban men voluntarily granted women their Islamic share of profits upon selling land in villages. As one urban man explained, *'When we sold the land, I ensured my sisters got their rightful money because that's what Islam teaches us. It's their right.'* However, this trend of progressive urban distribution cannot be generalized. The interviews revealed individual variations even within urban settings. For instance, while some urban men adhered strictly to Islamic-laws, others considered equitable inheritance as a moral choice

rather than a legal requirement. As one woman from Rawalpindi city reported:

'When my brothers sold their land, my elder brother gave me my Sharai (Islamic) half of the share, but my younger brother went further. He insisted on giving me an equal share from his portion, even though our older brother disagreed.'

This complexity reflects the hybrid governance systems discussed by Lamont and Molnár (2002), where customary and statutory norms coexist, producing opportunities for both progress and regression. In this way while equitable practices can rise through negotiation and contestation, they remain contingent on male allies rather than institutional guarantees. Such instances, though promising, do not dismantle the systemic foundations of male dominance in land-governance.

When probed into the reasons for the attitudinal differences between rural and urban distribution practices, the influence of education, media-exposure and awareness was evident in shaping equitable practices, resonating with findings of Htun and Weldon (2010). Urban respondents, exposed to higher education and statutory frameworks were more likely to view women's inheritance as a legal obligation rather than a cultural concession. Despite the blending of rural and urban practices, patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded, constraining women's access to land ownership. Rural women reported lack of awareness to access their inheritance rights, with one woman from Khinger stating, *"Even if I decide to claim my share, I don't know how to get it or who to ask."* This knowledge gap is exacerbated by reduced access to legal resources and a limited familial support. On contrary, urban women exhibited enhanced legal literacy, enabling them to navigate formal processes when needed.

Another prominent dynamic emerging from the data was the cultural and ideological influence of urban-encroachment on rural areas. Many rural respondents noted that the cultural environment of villages is changing because of internet and media access. One rural respondent from Saroba observed:

'With TV and internet, we now see how city people do things. Things aren't like they were before. Women are starting to know about their rights, but it's still not easy to act on them.'

This reveals the ideological encroachment of urbanization, where new narratives about equity are instilled into traditional spaces. Thus, urban-encroachment is not only shifting material landscapes but also altering the symbolic meanings attached to land and its governance. This aligns with Massey's (1994) argument that spatial transformations are not merely physical but also cultural and ideological. Urban-encroachment introduces new norms and expectations, gradually challenging traditional practices in rural settings. The findings also underscore the performative nature of boundary work. Urban influences disrupt traditional boundaries, creating a hybrid cultural space where rural and urban practices coexist and compete, what Soja (1998) refers to as "thirdspace", a zone of negotiation where customary practices intersect with modern ideologies. As urbanization progresses, these influences reshape not only physical landscapes but also the socio-cultural fabric of peri-urban areas. As per Lefebvre et al. (2013), space is continually redefined by the interplay between physical changes and the social relations that produce them. However, these findings contradict with Inglehart and Baker (2000) who associate urbanization with shifts toward individual autonomy and equity, as our findings reveal that these ideological shifts remains uneven, with enduring resistance from entrenched patriarchal norms that adapt to maintain dominance. As per Meinzen-Dick and Pradhan (2002), formal legal frameworks and informal customary practices coexist, often in tension. The selective adoption of statutory norms in peri-urban areas underscores how these hybrid spaces can enable progressive practices while simultaneously maintaining pathways for resistance. Moreover, these findings critically align with Simone's (2004) discussion of "people as infrastructure," which underscores the agency of individuals in shaping and reshaping urbanizing spaces. Urban-encroachment introduces new actors and networks that disseminate urban ideologies, but their influence is mediated by local power dynamics, including gendered hierarchies and class-structures. For instance, while urbanization may create opportunities for women to claim inheritance rights, patriarchal norms often recalibrate to undermine their claims, perpetuating systemic inequities.

Concluding remarks and way forward

The persistent gender inequalities in land ownership and governance remain a crucial barrier to sustainable development. Socio-economic and landscape transitions such as urban-encroachment intersects customary land distribution practices with modern socio-legal frameworks that have potential to both challenge and exacerbates existing inequalities. This study delved into these understudied interactions to unravel how evolving socio-economic and land transitions influence gendered land-governance and land rights, in the context of urban-encroachment and land commodification of peri-urban villages of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The study specifically sought to explore how symbolic violence normalizes gendered exclusions in rural land distribution, particularly in peri-urban spaces where urban-encroachment intensifies resource commodification. Moreover, it aimed to decipher under which conditions and how women negotiate, gain and exercise agency within systemic constraints, with an emphasis on temporary matrifocal phases. Finally, it investigated the similarities and differences in land distribution practices of rural and urban individuals and how simultaneous urban-encroachment and urbanization processes evolve gender norms and land-governance practices.

Building on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence, the research found that symbolic violence functions through deeply rooted patriarchal socio-cultural norms that frame male authority over land as natural, unchallengeable and socially legitimate. Women's contributions in resource-intensive labor and land-related decisions are majorly devalued, reinforcing systemic exclusions. The commodification of land under urban-encroachment enhanced these inequalities, as increased land values prioritized male-controlled transactions, furthering marginalization of women's land rights. Acts of resistance by women and equitable resource allocation by men were reframed as exceptions to patriarchal norms rather than systemic shifts. Secondly, drawing on the concept of relational autonomy, the study revealed that women use temporary matrifocal roles, often arising from widowhood or male absenteeism, to navigate patriarchal structures for resisting symbolic violence by equitable resource allocation and asserting limited agency. However, these rare instances were constrained by their temporary nature, often requiring

reliance on male allies, underscoring the contingent nature of such agency. Finally, expanding on gendered spatiality and boundary work, the study found that simultaneous urban-encroachment and urbanization reshapes not just the material but the ideological meaning associated with land too. Additionally, they produce hybrid governance systems where customary and statutory frameworks coexist reconfiguring traditional rural practices without dismantling patriarchal authority structures, as urban-influenced individuals display openness to women's inheritance rights, underscoring the evolving norms. However, these shifts often remain symbolic thus both perpetuating and contesting gendered exclusions, reflecting the uneven and partial trajectories of change.

Given the pervasive and entrenched nature of symbolic violence as reflected in accounts of women and men in this study, it is evident that change in gendered land-governance is not going to be easy. Yet, times of landscape transitions have the potential to be transformational avenues for fostering gender equity (Agarwal, 1994). The hegemony of dominant groups can be reshaped through conscious action by subordinate groups (Durey, 2008; Lusasi & Mwaseba, 2020). Bourdieu et al. (2002) identified that symbolic violence can be challenged or changed once it is recognized as it enables marginalized groups to redefine their roles within social structures. Further, Valli (2020) points that dynamic nature of misrecognition provides opportunities for contestation, allowing subordinate groups to influence systemic norms. Similarly, Sen (2001) highlights the potential of tackling cultural barriers that obstruct women's agency. Public campaigns led by influential community leaders, along with digital media initiatives, can reintroduce societal perceptions of women's roles in land-governance. Moreover, this study's observations of matrifocal practices, where widows and mothers prioritized equitable resource distribution, illustrate an entry point for reframing traditional gender roles within culturally accepted norms. Grassroots solidarity also holds substantial potential. Community-led initiatives, including women's support networks and cooperatives can amplify voices and build resilience against patriarchal norms. Cornwall (2016) stresses the value of inclusive coalitions in steering cultural change. Engaging male allies, as observed in cases where men advocated for their relative women's

inheritance, can further bolster these efforts and create broader buy-in for equitable practices.

As found, both urban-encroachment and urbanization introduces statutory norms that challenge traditional practices, such hybrid governance systems present another pathway for participatory governance. Meinzen-Dick and Pradhan (2002) denote that participatory models, which actively include marginalized groups, with time elevate both sustainability and equity in resource governance. Institutionalizing women's engagement in local land dispute resolution committees could extend a formalized platform to assert their agency, bridging the gap between statutory and customary frameworks. Economic empowerment is equally fundamental. Respondents in this study shared compelling narratives of economic agency mending familial relationships. Initiatives incentivizing equal inheritance registration and microfinance schemes focusing women landowners could obstruct dependency cycles and stimulate economic independence.

Another critical avenue for such transformation lies in tackling structural imbalances within pluralistic legal frameworks. The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011), though crucial, lacks the mechanisms to supersede socio-cultural resistance deeply rooted in peri-urban communities. Our findings portray women's lack of access to legal support to be the cause of not voicing for their inheritance rights. Building on this, mobile legal aid units and community paralegal programs have proven to be effective, as Mueller et al. (2019) and Goodwin and Maru (2017) showed, and could extend accessible support, enabling women to claim their inheritance rights effectively. Moreover, integrating gender-sensitive training for local governance bodies could challenge established biases and promote equitable decision-making systems. Finally, sustained research and evidence-based policymaking are essential for addressing the complexities of gendered Land-governance. Jackson (2003) work on gendered property rights highlights the importance of context-sensitive approaches to reform. Thus, longitudinal studies tracking the impacts of hybrid governance systems and socio-economic transitions can provide valuable insights for adaptive strategies.

Transforming gendered land-governance is not merely a policy challenge but a societal imperative. As Massey (1994) reminds us, the spaces we inhabit

are imbued with power relations, and reshaping these spaces requires sustained commitment to structural, cultural, and economic change. By embedding equity into the fabric of governance, Pakistan and other contexts witnessing similar transformational phases can navigate the complexities of socio-economic transitions to ensure that the benefits of development are shared inclusively and justly.

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Data availability Due to the sensitive nature of the information and the involvement of a marginalized community, data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

Ethical statement This study received ethical approval from the Internal Institutional Review Board of the Department of Gender Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore, Pakistan (reference: DGS/E-742) for data collection. Analysis and manuscript preparation were conducted at the University of Leeds, where no additional approval was required.

Informed consent The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality was maintained throughout, with culturally sensitive engagement practices employed. Efforts were made to reduce power imbalances, ensuring participants felt safe and comfortable when sharing sensitive information.

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