Beyond Yes & No: Navigating Sexual Consent and the Politics of Intimacy in Lahore

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Abstract

This thesis examines how sexual consent is understood and negotiated within heterosexual intimate relationships in Lahore, Pakistan. Moving beyond legalistic and binary frameworks of 'yes' and 'no', it conceptualizes consent as a relational, emotionally embedded practice shaped by socio-cultural norms, legal silences, and everyday emotional labor. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the study highlights the 'grey zones' of consent, where consent is often performed through compliance, hesitation, or silence. While global feminist discourses advocate for enthusiastic and affirmative consent, these ideals often clash with local realities marked by gendered expectations, religious obligations, and silence around sexuality. Grounded in feminist qualitative methodology and informed by critical theories of power, gender and subjectivity, the thesis explores how power, subjectivity, and social norms shape intimate negotiations of consent. By centering lived experiences and emotional contradictions, this study contributes to a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of sexual consent in Pakistan – one that resists simplification and foregrounds both the emotional realities and systemic constraints of intimate negotiations.

Keywords: Sexual Consent, Gendered Intimacy, Cultural Norms, Subjectivity, Power Dynamics, Consent Negotiations, Agency, Marital Rape, Lahore

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Introduction

This research didn't begin with a perfectly defined question or a clear academic plan. It began more quietly through a lingering discomfort, a feeling that something wasn't quite right, and a desire to make sense of that unease. Over time, it became harder to ignore how difficult it was to talk openly about consent, about unwanted intimacy, and about the blurred, complicated spaces so many of us move through in our relationships. And when I started listening—really listening—to other people's stories, I realized I wasn't alone in this confusion. There were moments, especially in conversations with women, where something heavy would hang in the air. A pause. A change of tone. A story half-told. It became clear that many of us are still searching for the words to explain what happened to us especially when what happened doesn't always fit into neat categories of violence. I found myself returning to the same questions over and over: What does consent really look like when it's shaped by fear, obligation, or silence? What does it mean to say yes when saying no isn't really an option? These questions didn't emerge from theory. They came from life. From moments that felt wrong but were brushed aside. From the shame that follows you even when you know, rationally, that you didn't ask for it. From watching people you care about, question whether their hurt even counts. Slowly, I began to realize that I needed to do this research not just because it mattered politically, but because it mattered personally. Because I didn't want to carry those questions alone anymore. Because that ache, the one that sits in your chest when something is off but you can't quite explain why, can be a powerful call to action. And because I know that ache is familiar to many, especially to those who have been told their discomfort is too small to matter, or too messy to be real. This work is, in part, for them.

This thesis explores how individuals in Pakistan understand and negotiate consent in their everyday lives. It looks at how cultural ideas of *izzat* (honor), *farz* (duty), *sharam* (shame),

and *majboori* (compulsion) are internalized, resisted, or quietly carried. During this research, I wasn't searching for one clear definition of consent. I was listening for how people 'feel' it, when it's present, when it's missing, and when it's uncertain. I wanted to understand how people survive in the grey zones, and what those grey zones can tell us about the larger structures that shape intimacy and vulnerability in this country.

I didn't come to this topic as an outsider. I come to it from within. I've been shaped by many of the same cultural norms, religious values, and silences as the people I spoke to. This thesis isn't an attempt to position myself above those experiences instead, it's a way to move through them. To try and understand how consent is lived, not just defined. To ask how people navigate intimacy in a place where sex is rarely discussed, but always regulated. In Pakistan, there is no legal recognition of marital rape. There is barely any vocabulary for consent in Urdu. Most people are never taught what it looks like to ask for consent or to give it. And yet, even without the language, people are constantly negotiating it; in their relationships, in moments of doubt, in the way they talk to each other, or choose not to. This thesis is about those negotiations. It's about the quiet stories that often don't make it into policy or protest slogans. It's about the emotional weight of guilt, the pressures of love, and the moments where people feel they can't say no, even when they want to.

Research Question(s)

This thesis approaches consent not simply as a legal principle or a moral ideal, but as a lived, relational, and culturally mediated practice. It asks how gendered expectations, religious values, familial obligations, and media discourses shape not just how people understand consent, but also how they feel, perform and contest it.

The central research question guiding this thesis is:

How do individuals in Lahore, Pakistan, perceive and navigate the concept of sexual consent within heterosexual intimate relationships, particularly in the absence of legal recognition for marital rape and amid entrenched patriarchal socio-cultural norms?

In pursuit of this inquiry, the thesis is guided by the following sub-questions:

- How is sexual consent understood, practiced, and negotiated within intimate relationships in Lahore?
- What cultural and emotional scripts, shaped by religion, gender norms, family expectations, and popular media, inform the perception and expression of consent?
- In what ways do individuals differentiate, blur, or fuse sexual consent with emotions such as guilt, desire, obligation, or shame?
- How do gendered dynamics shape the communication of consent, and what are the limits of mutual understanding in these interactions, especially given the research's limited access to male voices?
- What role has the #MeToo movement and local feminist movements played in shifting conversations, awareness, and resistance around sexual coercion, abuse, and the politics of consent in Pakistan?
- To what extent have feminist activism, digital platforms, and informal sex education introduced new vocabularies and frameworks for talking about consent among urban youth?

These questions emerge not only from academic curiosity but also from grounded encounters through interviews, informal conversations, and personal observations in which consent was spoken about and practiced in layered, fragmented, and often contradictory ways. They reflect a generational struggle: between inherited codes of modesty and shame, and emerging languages of autonomy, pleasure, and resistance. By placing these tensions at the center, this thesis aims to deconstruct the normative silence around sexual consent and offer a

nuanced, contextually rooted account of how people in Lahore are reshaping the boundaries of intimacy, power, and agency. Ultimately in this thesis, I argue that sexual consent in Lahore must be understood not as a clear-cut affirmation or refusal, but as a relational, emotionally negotiated practice shaped by structural silences, cultural scripts, and affective contradictions. Consent is often performed through compliance, hesitation or emotional management, especially by women negotiating care, fear, or social duty. While digital feminism and activist discourse offer powerful new frameworks such as enthusiastic consent or bodily autonomy, these are often in tension with the lived realities of those navigating intimacy within restrictive socio-cultural environment (like that of Pakistan). In this study, I assert that the 'grey zones' of consent are not moral failures but necessary sites of inquiry that illuminate the hidden labor, affective burden, and structural constraints that shape how people relate, resist, and endure.

Historical, Social & Legal Context

The legal and cultural discourses surrounding rape and sexual consent in Pakistan are shaped by the country's colonial inheritance, religious interpretations, and entrenched patriarchal structures. Pakistan's Penal Code, originally codified under British colonial rule in 1860, conceptualized rape within a narrow, heteronormative framework i.e. as a physical violation perpetrated by a man against a woman, often contingent on her being chaste and respectable. This formulation was steeped in Victorian morality and the colonial state's concern with disciplining native sexuality, particularly that of women (Cheema & Mustafa, 2008; Imran, 2005). Crucially, this legal stance made no provision for marital rape, implicitly viewing consent within marriage as perpetual and irrevocable which is an idea rooted in the English common law doctrine of coverture, which denied married women legal autonomy (Uma, 2023; Cheema, 2006). This foundational omission continues to shape Pakistan's legal landscape today.

The Pakistani legal infrastructure was further reoriented during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Hudood Ordinances were introduced under the banner of Islamization. These ordinances, particularly the Zina Ordinance, collapsed the boundaries between rape and adultery, requiring victims to present four adult male Muslim witnesses to prove non-consensual sex, a threshold that rendered most rape complaints legally indefensible and re-criminalized the victims themselves (Lau, 2007; Imran, 2005). As Siddiqa (2020) notes, this legal shift symbolized a broader ideological project: the state's assertion of control over women's bodies in the name of religious morality. Feminist legal scholars have widely condemned this period as one of institutionalized misogyny, where survivors not only faced legal abandonment but were also stigmatized and punished for their victimization (Warraich, 2016; Shaheed, 2009). While the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act of 2006 moved rape cases out of the Hudood framework and into the Pakistan Penal Code, this legal reform was partial and did not address the question of spousal consent or the criminalization of marital rape (Cheema, 2006; Waheed, 2024). In both statutory law and judicial interpretation, marriage continues to imply a blanket sexual contract, thereby negating the possibility of coercion within conjugal relations. Religious discourse, often mobilized by conservative *ulema* (religious scholars), reinforces this notion by portraying marital sex as a husband's divine right and a wife's religious duty. This position makes challenging non-consensual sex within marriage culturally taboo and legally incoherent (Khan & Gul, 2017; Warraich, 2016).

This legal silence reflects a broader social context in which sexual violence, especially within marriage, is systematically normalized, denied, or trivialized. Within many Pakistani households, sexuality remains a deeply private and often stigmatized topic, shaped by *izzat* (honor) and gendered expectations. Notably, even among participants in this study who were unmarried or not in marital relationships, these hegemonic discourses shaped how they

understood consent, pleasure, and coercion. This points to the prevalent influence of normative gender ideologies across different relationship contexts. The socio-legal impunity surrounding marital rape has serious consequences. Women's testimonies are often viewed with suspicion or dismissed altogether, and even when legal action is pursued, procedural obstacles, forensic inadequacies, and hostile courtroom environments act as barriers to justice (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2021). As Uma (2023) asserts, the failure to criminalize marital rape is not merely a legislative gap but a reflection of the structural devaluation of women's bodily autonomy in both public and private spheres.

Even though feminist mobilizations and activities, such as the *Aurat March*, have seen an increase in popularity, overall progress has been slow. A rare legal breakthrough occurred in February 2024 when a Sindh court convicted a man for sodomizing his wife and sentenced him to three years in prison and a Rs. 30,000 fine (Sarfraz, 2024). While this case was widely discussed as it marked a symbolic crack in the legal invisibility surrounding sexual violence within marriage, it was not based on the wife's lack of consent but on the nature of the sexual act itself, which is criminalized as "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" under the Pakistani law (Pakistan Penal Code, 1860). This distinction is crucial as although the wife reportedly did not consent, the legal basis for punishment did not affirm her right to bodily autonomy within marriage. In this sense, the case reveals the persistent limitations of Pakistan's legal system where violations of consent within marriage remain largely unrecognized. Besides, without a broader reconceptualization and reconsideration of consent as a dynamic, communicative process negotiated within structures of gendered power, such cases still remain exceptions rather than signs of systemic reforms.

Aurat March, launched in 2018, has overtime become one of the most visible and contested expressions of contemporary feminism in Pakistan. Initiated by a collective of feminists, students, and civil society activists in Karachi, the March was inspired by the global

Women's March and was designed as a platform to demand an end to gender-based violence, systemic discrimination, and state neglect of women's rights. Since then, the *Aurat March* has expanded into a nationwide movement, with annual marches now held across major cities including Lahore, Islamabad, Hyderabad, and Multan on International Women's Day (March 8th). While it is a literal march through public streets, it is also much more; it is a political, cultural, and discursive intervention that challenges patriarchal norms embedded in law, media, and everyday life. Each year, organizers release a 'Feminist Manifesto' or Charter of Demands, which addresses a range of intersecting issues such as the criminalization of marital rape, access to reproductive health, labor protections for domestic workers and the rights of transgender and non-binary individuals. The March is deliberately intersectional, bringing together diverse groups as working-class women, students, trans activists, artists, and survivors of violence under a shared feminist banner. Slogans like *'Mera Jism Meri Marzi'* (My body, My Choice), *'Consent is not a Luxury'* and *'No More Silence'* have become rallying cries that directly confront cultural and legal silencing around sexuality, consent, and bodily autonomy. Despite facing immense backlash from conservative religious groups, political commentators, and even state actors, the *Aurat March* has succeeded in pushing issues like marital rape, emotional labor, and sexual consent into national conversation. The March functions not just as a protest but as a feminist reimagining of public space in Pakistan that creates alternative narratives around gender, power, and justice, while offering solidarity to those who have long been silenced. Importantly, the March also exists across digital platforms, where hashtags, posters and testimonies continue to circulate long after the streets have cleared, allowing feminist ideas to travel, evolve, and take root in everyday life (Ameer, 2021).

Pakistan's socio-legal context regulates women's sexuality through mechanisms of law, custom, and stigma. The very notion of consent is flattened into either silence or presumed duty which renders women's agency meaningless especially within conjugal settings. Challenging

these frameworks requires not only legal reform but also cultural transformation i.e. a redefinition of consent where women's lived experiences are centered and their rights to autonomy, dignity, and pleasure, both inside and outside of marriage are recognized.

Scope & Contribution

This thesis offers a theoretically engaged and contextually grounded exploration of how sexual consent is perceived, expressed, and negotiated within heterosexual intimate relationships in Lahore, Pakistan. At a time like this, when global feminist movements are trying to reform how societies talk about consent, coercion, and agency, this research brings these conversations into a space where they remain largely ignored and under-explored: urban Pakistan. By focusing on the lived realities of young adults navigating both, traditional expectations and modern feminist discourses, this study contributes new insights into the social, emotional and discursive complexities of sexual consent in a context marked by shame, silence and ambiguity.

This significance of this research does not lie in producing universally applicable definitions or prescriptions of consent, rather it lies in offering a deeply situated, emotionally honest account of how consent is lived and understood by individuals negotiating competing cultural logics. Drawing on feminist and post-structuralist theories of subjectivity, power, and discourse, this research moves beyond legalistic and binary understandings of consent. Instead, it conceptualizes consent as a relational, ongoing process shaped by affective negotiations, embodied experiences and socio-cultural scripts surrounding duty, modesty, desire and shame. This study contributes to the limited but growing body of scholarship on sexual subjectivity in South Asia by centering voices that are often silenced or overlooked. It amplifies the complex emotional registers through which consent is communicated and contested where silence can be both a survival strategy and a source of ambiguity, and where consent cannot always be clearly articulated within the language currently available. By doing so, it challenges dominant

frameworks that treat consent as either fully autonomous or entirely coerced, and instead maps the in-between spaces, the grey zones, where intimacy, power, and vulnerability intersect.

Furthermore, the thesis holds political and social relevance at a moment when issues such as marital rape, sexual violence, and bodily autonomy are slowly entering public debate in Pakistan. In contributing empirical depth and theoretical nuance to these debates, this research not only offers an academic intervention but also opens up new ways of imagining how consent might be more meaningfully understood, taught, and practiced in contexts shaped by both resistance and constraint.

Overview of Chapters

This thesis moves from personal stories and grounded encounters to broader questions about how consent is shaped, felt, and regulated in contemporary Pakistan. The following chapters trace this journey by weaving together my interlocutors' voices with theoretical frameworks that center intimacy both a deeply personal and profoundly political space.

The next section outlines the methodological approach, describing how participants were selected, how interviews were conducted and analyzed, and how emotional and ethical sensitivity was maintained throughout this research. This is followed by the Literature Review and Theoretical Framework chapter, which situates the thesis within existing academic conversations around consent, sexuality, and social power. It provides the foundation for the analysis that follows by outlining the key debates and concepts that shape this research. The core of the thesis lies in four analytical chapters. Chapter 1 offers a conceptual and descriptive entry point into the idea of 'grey zones', where consent is experienced not as a binary but as a shifting, emotionally fraught negotiation. Rather than providing rigid definitions, this chapter lays the groundwork by highlighting the ambiguity and complexity that frame many of the narratives explored in later chapters. Chapter 2 explores the cultural narratives that inform these consent negotiations, such as informal sex education, religious discourse, and media portrayals.

It shows how these discourses shape both expectations and silences. Chapter 3 focuses on my interlocutors' experiences of guilt, shame, desire, and care, and examines how these emotional layers complicate their ability to assert or withhold sexual agency. Chapter 4 situates these lived contradictions within the context of contemporary feminist movements and digital activism in the country. It examines how my interlocutors engage with feminist messaging, while also highlighting the limitations, exclusions, and backlash that often accompany these engagements. The final chapter brings these insights together to argue for a more contextually grounded and relational understanding of consent, one that resists simplistic binaries and centers the grey zones of everyday intimacy in Pakistan.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative feminist research design rooted in an interpretivist epistemology. Interpretivist epistemology refers to the philosophical approach to understanding knowledge that emphasizes the subjective nature of reality and the importance of interpretation in shaping our understanding. Qualitative research, as Creswell (2014) notes, is particularly suited for studying nuanced, emotionally layered topics where participants' meanings and lived experiences are central. Rather than seeking generalizability, this approach privileges depth over breadth, aiming to understand how people make sense of their realities within specific contexts. The feminist orientation of this research demands an interrogation not just of content, but of the process of knowledge production itself. Feminist epistemology, as explained by scholars such as Sandra Harding (2004) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), insists that knowledge is situated, and that the perspectives of marginalized groups, especially women, offer critical insights into structures that often remain unexamined. This approach moves away from the presumed neutrality of traditional social science and moves towards what Haraway (1988) calls "situated knowledges" that refers to the recognition that all knowledge is partial and is shaped by social positioning.

Sampling

Given the intimate and culturally sensitive nature of this study a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach was used. Non-probabilistic, purposive sampling means intentionally selecting participants based on specific characteristics or knowledge relevant to the research, rather than choosing them randomly. In simple terms, it means picking people on purpose, those who are most likely to provide useful, meaningful insights for the study, because of who they are or what they have experienced. This was complemented by snowball sampling to reach a broader participant base. This approach is common in feminist qualitative research, especially when working with hard-to-reach or stigmatized populations (Noy, 2008; Hesse-

Biber, 2013). Participants were initially recruited through my personal networks, including friends, classmates, and acquaintances. The sensitive nature of this research required for building trust between me and my participants. Once initial participants had completed their interviews, I employed a snowball sampling method, wherein existing participants referred others who might be willing to contribute. This method, as Atkinson and Flint (2001) argue, is effective for accessing "hidden populations" in contexts where formal channels may not be helpful. In addition to personal referrals and personal network, I also posted in a closed Facebook group 'GirlPower@LUMS' with over 3,000 women from Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), which helped me connect with several willing individuals. This virtual space offered a fertile ground to locate individuals already somewhat familiar with discourses on sexual autonomy, bodily rights, and feminist politics. While not all members engaged with the post, a few reached out privately to share their willingness to participate, and in some cases, connected me to others who were not in the group but fit the study's inclusion criteria (listed below). As Salmons (2015) suggests, online recruitment not only expands geographical access but also facilitates more anonymous and safer initial contact when dealing with stigmatized topics like sex and consent. This combination of personal, digital, and networked recruitment was vital for a topic still largely considered taboo in Pakistani society. It also demonstrated how digital feminist communities can function as both support structures and platforms for feminist knowledge production (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019).

When I first started this research, I hoped to speak with people of all genders. I particularly wanted to include more men to understand how they think about consent and intimacy. But despite multiple efforts, most men either declined or expressed discomfort talking about these issues. In the end, only one man agreed to be interviewed. This silence became a finding in itself; it revealed just how hard it still is for men in Pakistan to talk openly about intimacy, especially when it doesn't fit into dominant masculine norms. This discomfort was

likely intensified by my positionality as a woman researcher. In a conservative society like Pakistan, discussing emotional vulnerability or non-dominant ideas of masculinity with a woman can feel threatening, shameful, or simply, too uncomfortable for many men. My gender may have unintentionally heightened their self-censorship, making it even more difficult for them to engage in conversations that challenge traditional expectations of how men should think and behave.

In total, I interviewed 14 people (for reference: Table 1) aged between 20 and 34 years. The participants were middle-class, urban, and mostly university-educated. This was a conscious choice, as this group is often the most exposed to feminist ideas through social media and online spaces. The majority of my sample identified as women (n=12), with one participant identifying as non-binary and one as a man. Although this sample is not representative of Pakistan's broader population, such representativeness is not the objective in feminist qualitative research, which values subjective, contextual, and localized insights over statistical generalization (Patton, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Instead, the aim was to highlight the social, relational, and discursive processes through which consent is negotiated and gendered expectations are internalized or resisted.

To be included, participants needed to:

- Be aged between 20–35 years old.
- Have had at least one heterosexual intimate relationship.
- Be willing to speak in Urdu, English, or a mix of both.
- Feel reasonably safe and comfortable discussing topics around sexuality, consent, desire, and power. (This was informally assessed during initial conversations and pre-interview exchanges. All participants volunteered to be part of the research after being informed of the study's aim and scope)

Minors were excluded due to the ethical implications of interviewing underage individuals on topics of sexual consent. Additionally, participants from strictly rural or offline populations were not reached, largely due to limitations in digital access and the reliance on social media and personal networks for recruitment. While this introduces class and education-related limitations to the study, it also reflects the ways in which discourses on consent and feminist movements currently circulate in Pakistan, i.e. often through elite or urban digital spaces. As noted by Baig (2018), despite its classed exclusions, this urban, digital feminist space, plays a crucial role in shaping public feminist discourse in the country.

Pseudonyms[1]	**Age**	**Gender Identity**	**Marital Status**
Alia	22 years	Non-Binary	Unmarried
Nolie	27 years	Female	Unmarried
Annie	28 years	Female	Unmarried
Hareem	25 years	Female	Unmarried
Mingle	30 years	Female	Married
Zoro	26 years	Female	Unmarried at the time of interview (set to get married soon)
Ransal	29 years	Male	Married
Froggy	27 years	Female	Married
Minnie	35 years	Female	Married
Ripley	22 years	Female	Unmarried
Tita	23 years	Female	Unmarried
Fofo	26 years	Female	Unmarried
Lilly	23 years	Female	Unmarried

[1] All names listed are pseudonyms chosen to protect the identities of participants. While I offered them the option to select their own pseudonyms, most preferred that I choose one for them. I selected these names randomly and on instinct. They don't reflect the participants' real names, backgrounds, or identities, but they were chosen with care to maintain anonymity while also allowing me to remember and relate to each voice in a distinct way.

Fapa	28 years	Female	Unmarried at the time of interview (set to get married soon)

Table 1: Demographic details of Interlocutors

Data Collection - Semi-structured Interviews

This research used semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection. This method is well-suited for exploring complex, deeply personal topics such as intimacy, sexual consent, guilt, and gendered power dynamics especially in socio-cultural contexts where an open dialogue about sexuality is discouraged or considered taboo (Gillham, 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2013). Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structure and flexibility. A set of guiding questions framed each conversation I had, yet the format remained adaptable, and allowed participants to navigate their narratives on their own terms. As Galletta (2013) notes, this method facilitates a dialogic space where participants are co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive subjects of inquiry. This aligns closely with feminist interviewing approaches, which emphasize relational ethics, reciprocity, and push towards reducing hierarchies between the researcher and the participants (Oakley, 1981; DeVault & Gross, 2012). All interviews were conducted between June and October 2024. Interviews were held virtually over Zoom and/or WhatsApp, which was a practical decision that also aligned with the need to ensure participant anonymity, comfort, and geographic accessibility. The digital format allowed participants to participate safely, particularly those who may not have felt comfortable meeting in person due to the sensitivity of the research topic. As Salmons (2015) argues, online qualitative interviews can offer both convenience and intimacy, especially when researching stigmatized or emotionally charged topics. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, and participants had the option of speaking in English, Urdu, or a combination of both, depending on their comfort. This linguistic fluidity was crucial to fostering a space where participants could express complex emotions and ideas using culturally

resonant terms. As Temple and Young (2004) caution, translation is not a neutral act; allowing participants to speak in the languages of their lived experience enriched the emotional and narrative depth of the interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), fully transcribed, and selectively translated when necessary. I conducted thematic coding manually, identifying recurring patterns, metaphors, and cultural references that aligned with the broader research questions. Key Urdu terms such as *farz* (duty), *sharam* (shame), and *majboori* (compulsion) were retained in transliteration to preserve their cultural and affective meanings. This strategy follows Spivak's (1988) caution against epistemic violence in translation, where local concepts are often flattened to fit Western academic categories. However, since this thesis is written in English, I recognize that I might not have fully captured the rich, layered meanings my interlocutors' words hold within their original cultural context, and that some of their emotional depth may inevitably have been flattened in translation.

Ethical Considerations

Given the deeply personal nature of the interviews, emotional and ethical sensitivity was integral to the data collection process. I chose not to ask for formal written consent to avoid making the process feel bureaucratic or intimidating, especially since the conversations were already emotionally vulnerable. Instead, I obtained clear oral consent at the beginning of each interview, after explaining the aims of the study and how data would be used. Participants were encouraged to set the pace and boundaries of the conversation. I reassured them throughout that they could skip questions, pause, or withdraw at any point. This approach aligns with trauma-informed qualitative research methods, which prioritize participant agency, emotional safety, and flexible pacing (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2010; Etherington, 2007). The goal was not just to 'extract' data, but to ensure the research process itself was respectful and non-exploitative. This meant treating participants not as subjects, but as people sharing deeply personal parts of their lives. I made sure they felt heard and in control by letting them decide what to share, how

much to say, and when to stop. I avoided creating any pressure or urgency, allowing them to speak in their own time and language. I also followed up with participants after emotionally difficult conversations to check in on their well-being. These small acts of care were central to creating a space that felt safe and non-extractive, where participants weren't reduced to data points but treated with dignity and empathy throughout. In addition, all interviews were anonymized, and identifying details were removed. The recordings were stored securely on an encrypted, password-protected device accessible only to me, and backups were kept on a secure, private cloud account with two-factor authentication. Additionally, all the recordings will be permanently deleted once the research is submitted and no longer needed for analysis. While I didn't receive any requests for mental health referrals, I checked in with participants after particularly difficult interviews and encouraged them to reach out if they ever felt the need.

I was constantly aware of the power dynamics at play during the interviews, shaped in part by my position as a young Pakistani woman researcher. While I shared many cultural, linguistic, and social commonalities with my participants, I also occupied a distinct role as the one leading the research. This dual position, both familiar and authoritative, shaped how trust was built, how stories were shared, and what remained unsaid. Feminist scholars like Reinharz (1992) and Harding (2004) remind us that reflexivity isn't just about naming one's positionality, but actively reflecting on how it impacts the research process. At times, my identity allowed participants to speak with a sense of ease or solidarity; at others, it may have caused hesitation or filtered disclosures. Still, this proximity to the topic, rather than being a limitation, became a source of insight. As Harding (1991) argues through the lens of standpoint theory, the "view from below" can reveal dynamics that might otherwise remain invisible. In this research, my cultural familiarity, my gender and my emotional investment became a part of the interpretative framework i.e. it was not something to bracket out but something to work with. Feminist

methodology embraces this kind of relational, situated inquiry, where knowledge is shaped through context, dialogue and care (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Use of AI Tools

In the course of developing this thesis, I used artificial intelligence (AI) tools as supplementary aids to support writing clarity, organization, literature searching and thematic refinement. These tools did not replace critical thinking, fieldwork, or analytical reasoning, but were engaged as part of a broader scholarly workflow aimed at enhancing precision and coherence. Specifically, OpenAI's ChatGPT (version 4.0) was used for several limited yet important purposes.

Firstly, AI tools facilitated the refinement of early drafts through paraphrasing suggestions, vocabulary sharpening, and assistance in breaking down complex sentences for readability especially in sections that aimed to communicate sensitive or emotionally nuanced material. Secondly, the AI provided support in developing preliminary thematic maps during the data analysis phase, helping to cluster codes into broader conceptual categories. These clusters were always reviewed, reworked, and reworded manually, drawing on my judgment and grounding in the qualitative data. No final analytical decisions were outsourced to AI; rather, it was used to prompt new angles of inquiry or highlight linguistic patterns that might otherwise be overlooked.

Additionally, AI was used to conduct supplementary literature exploration through keyword mapping and cross-database comparison, especially to identify recent publications related to sexual consent in South Asia and feminist discourses. However, all cited materials were manually reviewed for credibility, relevance, and scholarly rigor, and no AI-generated references were used. Importantly, AI use did not extend to fieldwork, participant engagement, transcription, or interpretation of participant narratives; those remained solely my responsibility, grounded in feminist ethics and positional reflexivity. Finally, the AI was used

to support the refinement of language, particularly clarifying tone and pacing. These tools were engaged strictly for editorial assistance and all conceptual, interpretative and analytical content remained entirely original and authored by me, in line with the thesis's academic and ethical standards.

While AI tools can offer valuable support, their role in this research remained supplementary and critically mediated. Citing their use here is part of a larger commitment to transparency, accountability, and ethical engagement with emerging technologies in academic writing.

Analytical Lens

During the analysis, feminist ethics guided how participants' stories were understood. They were not understood and analyzed as isolated personal struggles but as experiences shaped by broader social, legal, and patriarchal structures. This lens kept the focus on the systems of power influencing women's lives rather than framing their experiences and narratives through an individual psychological lens. To make sense of the data, I used a hybrid approach combining thematic analysis and discourse analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, thematic analysis helped identify and organize patterns across the interviews. The process involved multiple readings of the transcripts and coding emergent ideas such as guilt, modesty, emotional labor and resistance. These codes were developed directly from participants' words allowing the themes to remain grounded in their lived realties rather than forcing them into pre-set categories. Alongside this, a discourse-orientated analytical approach allowed for a closer look at how participants talked about concepts such as consent and desire. Drawing on Foucault's idea that discourse shapes subjectivity and social norms (1978), this analysis examined the cultural scripts embedded in everyday language. This was not a formal linguistic analysis, but a critical, interpretive reading, which was in line with feminist post-structural approaches (Baxter, 2003). Using these two methods together made it possible for

me to do both; stay close to the emotional complexity of my interlocutors' stories and connect those experiences to the larger cultural and discursive patterns shaping them. The analysis did not treat quotes as simple illustrations but as moments that could complicate, challenge, or deepen the theoretical frameworks guiding the study.

This foundation now leads into the heart of the thesis, where participants' stories and theoretical insights come together to explore how power, guilt, pleasure, and resistance shape the everyday negotiations of consent in contemporary Pakistan. Through these stories, and the ideas that help make sense of them, the thesis tries to stay close to the complicated, personal, and deeply social nature of intimacy.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

This chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for the thesis by situating the study within key academic debates on sexual consent, power, and agency. It brings together interdisciplinary literature from feminist theory, sociology, legal studies, and critical discourse analysis to examine how sexual consent is understood, expressed, and negotiated, particularly within contexts marked by gendered hierarchies and cultural taboos. While much of the global discourse on consent focuses on the principles of autonomy, coercion, and affirmative agreement, these discussions often presume a liberal individualist subject that may not translate seamlessly into the Pakistani socio-cultural context. This chapter therefore engages with both Global North, postcolonial and South Asian feminist scholarships to identify the limits of dominant consent frameworks and builds a theoretical lens that foregrounds relationality, discourse, and gendered subject formation.

The chapter unfolds in two parts. The first maps the evolution of academic thinking around sexual consent, examining how the concept has been problematized by feminist scholars who challenge its legalistic and overly individualist assumptions. The second introduces the theoretical frameworks that guide this study; particularly the works of Michel Foucault, Saba Mahmood, Pierre Bourdieu, and Adrienne Rich, to offer an analytical toolkit for unpacking how consent is lived, interpreted, and shaped within broader structures of power, religion, and cultural discourse.

Literature Review

Sexual consent, often assumed to be a straightforward expression of willingness, is in fact one of the most contested and theorized concepts in feminist literature on sexuality and power. Its complexity lies in the fact that while law and policy seek clear definitions, lived experiences of consent are shaped by relational, emotional, and structural dynamics that often resist simplification. In academic literature, multiple definitions of consent coexist ranging

from legalistic accounts to embodied and affective understandings. These divergent perspectives underscore the need for a more nuanced approach that goes beyond binary ideas of 'yes' and 'no'.

Sexual consent is commonly understood as a person's voluntary, conscious, and sober willingness to participate in a specific sexual act with a specific partner in a specific context (Willis & Jozkowski, 2019). Beres (2007) similarly defines it in broad terms as a mutual agreement to engage in sexual activity. Other scholars have built on this foundation by emphasizing both autonomy and communication. Dougherty and Sherwin, as cited in Kukla (2021), describe consent as an autonomous act of choice, which may involve communication either as an essential element or as a subsequent expression of a cognitive decision. Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) take a slightly expanded view, framing consent as the voluntary communication, verbal or nonverbal, of willingness to engage in sexual behavior.

At first glance, these definitions may seem clear-cut. However, feminist theorists have long critiqued such models for assuming that consent is always given freely and without constraint. Kukla (2021) challenges this assumption by arguing that when individuals lack autonomy, whether due to internal limitations or external pressures, they cannot meaningfully and legitimately consent to sex. She further explains that even in situations where no explicit abuse of power occurs, underlying power imbalances between partners can still weaken a person's autonomy, since equal power between two individuals is rarely the norm. This perspective complicates legal or policy-driven approaches to consent, which often rest on the assumption of equal and rational agents. Similarly, Beres (2007) emphasizes that for consent to be valid, it must be given freely and without coercion. Building on this, Linander et al. (2021) argue that power often functions through implicit norms and social expectations, making it difficult to identify or resist. In such cases, individuals might give consent but the conditions

under which they give consent are shaped by subtle social pressures, especially in cultures where modesty and obedience are gendered expectations.

Radical feminist theorists such as Catherine MacKinnon (1989) go even further and argue that in patriarchal societies women's ability to consent is inherently compromised. According to MacKinnon, patriarchy conditions women to prioritize male desire and to internalize submission as the norm, making true sexual autonomy impossible. In her view, consent becomes less of an expression of freedom and more a reflection of social subordination. Andrea Dworkin (1987), in *Intercourse*, claims that sexual consent cannot be genuinely free as long as the sexual act is embedded within a system that subordinates women i.e. patriarchy. This position is echoed by Robin West (2002), who points out that women's decisions to engage in sexual activity are often not shaped by uncoerced personal choice but instead are shaped by social forces which include fear of rejection, desire for approval and relational obligations.

These critiques raise fundamental questions about the conceptual foundations of consent, especially within heterosexual relationships that are shaped by long-standing gender hierarchies. As a result, scholars such as Kitzinger and Frith (1999), and Loick (2020) have proposed alternative models that frame consent as a socially and discursively constructed practice and not as a binary or an isolated decision. Kitzinger and Frith, for example, show how women often "say no" through indirect language due to fear of violence, awkwardness, or damaging the relationship. In such cases, a lack of overt refusal cannot be interpreted as willingness. Loick (2020) offers a particularly sharp critique of the liberal framing of consent. He argues that treating consent as a singular token exchanged between autonomous individuals fails to recognize the historically embedded power relations that shape sexual interactions. According to Loick, this possessive, individualistic model ignores the structural asymmetries of gender, class, race, and sexuality, which determine the terms of intimacy and whose desires are normalized.

In addition, scholars such as Burkett and Hamilton (2012) argue that postfeminist sexual agency, which emphasizes individual choice and empowerment, can mask the structural and emotional labor women perform in negotiating consent. Burkett and Hamilton's work highlights how young women often feel pressured to enthusiastically consent, not necessarily because they desire sex, but because they feel they should be sexually assertive in a culture that commodifies empowerment. Finally, the concept of sexual scripts, introduced by Gagnon and Simon (1973), remains foundational to understanding how cultural norms mediate and dictate sexual behavior. These scripts dictate that men are expected to initiate and pursue sex, while women are expected to be passive or resistant, thus rendering male insistence and female ambiguity as culturally legible, even if it is ethically problematic. Together these theoretical contributions call for a shift from voluntarist, individualistic models of consent to more relational, intersectional, and power-aware frameworks. They urge scholars and activists to consider how structural inequalities, emotional dynamics, and cultural expectations shape not only the practice of consent but its very legibility and coherence.

The notion of marital rape remains highly contested and often silenced within Pakistan's legal, social, and religious frameworks. As Mansab (2024) notes, "There exists a common misunderstanding that instances of rape are limited to the occurrences that take place solely outside the confines of a marital relationship" (p. 12). This assumption reflects cultural beliefs that frame sexual access as an implicit right of marriage, rather than a matter that requires ongoing and mutual consent.

The legal invisibility of marital rape is reinforced by societal taboos around sex education and women's autonomy. As observed in a report titled *MARITAL RAPE IN PAKISTAN: A Framework for Analysis and Prevention* (2018) by the Centre for Business and Society, "The discourse regarding spousal violence, in the context of Pakistan, is particularly complex owing to the non-recognition of marital rape as a legitimate, legal issue and the

societal norms of silencing any debate surrounding sex education." This silence is underpinned by dominant interpretations of Islamic marital obligations and colonial-era penal codes, both of which exclude spousal rape from the category of punishable violence. In her work on intimate partner violence and women's health, Zakar (2012) outlines how Pakistan's patriarchal structures grant men disproportionate control over both socio-economic and intimate domains. These conditions reduce women to positions of dependency, often regarded by men as property, which they can utilize any way they want. While dependency is one axis of vulnerability, it is not the only one. As highlighted in the report *Suffering in Silence – Marital Rape in Pakistan* (2023), "even in cases where women aren't solely dependent on their husbands, they are still subjected to sexual and other forms of violence, indicating this issue is much deeper".

Social class, education, working status, and geography all mediate women's vulnerability, but across these factors, shame remains a powerful silencer. Marital rape is largely unreported due to cultural notions of honor and the belief that sexual matters are strictly private. According to a report by Aurat Foundation (2012), while 820 rapes and gang rapes were reported that year, no legal or statistical distinction was made regarding marital rape, hence rendering it invisible even within formal documentation. This lack of awareness is further reflected in empirical studies. A 2020 study conducted by faculty and students at the University of Karachi found that women in the city largely lacked understanding of marital rape and viewed it instead as a "duty of the wife to follow commands of her husbands to keep him relaxed and satisfied" (Sarfaraz et al., 2020, p. 57). Similarly, a 2022 study at the University of Punjab found that feminist movements like the *Aurat March*, which have attempted to publicly challenge this silence, were met with backlash—not only from religious groups but also from women who internalized prevailing cultural norms (Mukhtar, 2022).

Pakistan's legal structure draws heavily from a combination of British colonial laws and Islamic jurisprudence, both of which have excluded spousal rape from legal recognition.

While some laws penalize sexual violence, there is no explicit provision criminalizing marital rape in Pakistan's Penal Code. Article 375 of the Pakistan Penal Code defines rape but includes an exception for married couples, stating that sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, provided she is not under the age of sixteen, is not considered rape. This exclusion creates a legal void, effectively denying married women the right to withhold consent. Scholars such as Zia (2022) and Khan (2018) have argued that this silence is not accidental but symptomatic of a broader patriarchal logic embedded in the state's moral and legal order—one that defines women primarily in relation to men and their reproductive and emotional labor. Despite the legal stagnation, there have been rulings that offer cautious optimism. As mentioned earlier, the 2024 Sindh High Court decision to convict a man for sodomizing his wife was prosecuted under the charges of unnatural offenses rather than marital rape. This marked the first time in Pakistan's legal history that sexual violence within marriage received formal judicial condemnation. Feminist legal scholars and activists hailed the verdict as a milestone. Sarfraz (2024) writes that the ruling "reaffirmed the state's responsibility to intervene in the private sphere when bodily autonomy is violated, even within the marital contract." However, while the verdict had symbolic value, it remains an exception rather than the rule hence highlighting how limited and fragmented the legal frameworks remain for survivors of spousal sexual violence.

The feminist movement in Pakistan, particularly through platforms like the *Aurat March*, has repeatedly called for criminalization of marital rape and broader reforms around sexual consent and bodily autonomy. However, these calls have been met with sharp resistance, not only from conservative and religious factions, but also from within families and communities where such demands are seen as Western, immoral and disruptive to familial harmony. The backlash has been particularly intense against slogans like *Mera Jism, Meri Marzi* (My Body, My Choice), which is often misinterpreted as advocating sexual anarchy

rather than asserting bodily integrity. Feminist scholars like Afiya Shehrbano Zia (2018) have pointed out how moral panic around feminist discourse is deliberately manufactured by political and religious actors who fear that such narratives could destabilize long-standing gender hierarchies. In an environment like this, consent becomes not just a private negotiation but a deeply politicized site where competing visions of gender, morality, and modernity collide.

Moreover, these legal and political debates are intertwined with informal institutions such as *jirgas* (tribal meeting of elders), *panchayats* (village councils), and religious councils, which frequently mediate family and sexual disputes outside the formal court system. These community-based mechanisms often prioritize reconciliation over justice and reinforce patriarchal norms. According to Ali and Gavino (2008), such forums rarely treat sexual violence within marriage as a punishable offense and often view the wife's protest as a breach of modesty or family honor. This results in a parallel legal universe where the very notion of consent is rendered irrelevant, and silence or submission is normalized as a virtue.

Ultimately, the denial of marital rape as a legitimate legal offense reflects a broader societal unwillingness to acknowledge women as autonomous sexual beings. This erasure has profound consequences, not only in the form of unreported trauma, but also in how women are socialized to internalize their subjugation. Ayesha Khan (2018), in her study of gender-based violence and legal reform in Pakistan, points out that meaningful change requires addressing both institutional resistance and the normative frameworks that sustain gendered hierarchies. The feminist demand for recognizing marital rape is not merely a legal issue, it is a demand for reframing the very foundation of intimacy, marriage, and citizenship in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the complex ways in which sexual consent is constructed, negotiated, and internalized within intimate relationships in Pakistan, this research draws on a multidisciplinary

theoretical framework informed by the works of Michel Foucault, Saba Mahmood, Pierre Bourdieu and Adrienne Rich. These theorists, while grounded in different traditions, such as post-structuralism, social constructionism and radical feminism, offer critical insights into how power, agency, and gendered subjectivities are shaped within patriarchal societies.

Michel Foucault's work is foundational for understanding how consent is not merely an individual decision but instead is a product of discursive regimes and relational power. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Foucault (1978/1990) argues that power is not merely repressive but productive, i.e. it shapes subjectivities, behaviors, and social norms through subtle, everyday practices. He introduces the concept of "docile bodies" to describe how individuals internalize societal expectations and learn to regulate themselves in accordance with dominant norms. This process of internalization is especially relevant in the context of sexual consent, where power operates not only through direct coercion but also through culturally sanctioned expectations of gender roles and relational duties. Foucault's conception of power as relational and omnipresent allows this research to interrogate how gendered dynamics within Pakistani intimate relationships are constituted through repeated acts of compliance, self-surveillance, and embodied discipline. In addition, his emphasis on discourse (a system of knowledge that defines what is considered natural or moral) offers a valuable lens through which to analyze how cultural, religious, and familial scripts influence perceptions of sex, shame and agency in my interlocutors' narratives.

Complementing Foucault's work is Saba Mahmood's exploration of agency within the context of Islamic piety. In *Politics of Piety* (2005), Mahmood critiques liberal feminist notions of agency that equate it with resistance or autonomy in the Western sense. Instead, she argues that agency can also be expressed through acts of pious submission or adherence to religious norms, especially in non-Western contexts. This reframing is critical for this research, as it allows for a more nuanced analysis of how women in Pakistan navigate consent within

frameworks of religiosity and social respectability. Rather than viewing compliance as a lack of agency, Mahmood urges us to understand how women make ethical decisions within the moral structures available to them. This framework is particularly relevant for interpreting moments when my interlocutors described giving consent out of marital obligation or religious duty. Mahmood's approach helps complicate simplistic binaries of coercion and autonomy, emphasizing instead how gendered subjectivities are shaped by dialectic between structure and ethical self-formation.

A broader epistemological foundation for this research lies in social constructionist theory, which views concepts such as gender, sexuality, and consent as socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Social constructionism underscores how meaning is created through cultural narratives, language, and institutional practices. It reveals how norms around female modesty, male entitlement, and marital obedience are not 'natural' but constructed through repeated discursive practices. Within this framework, Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence becomes a critical analytical tool. Symbolic violence refers to the subtle, almost invisible mechanisms through which dominant groups reproduce social hierarchies by making their worldview appear natural or inevitable. In patriarchal societies, Bourdieu argues, this form of violence is gendered i.e. men maintain dominance not just through coercion but by shaping cultural norms that women internalize. This is particularly evident in how many of my interlocutors described feeling obligated to engage in sex, even when they did not desire it, due to societal expectations about marital duty and obedience. Symbolic violence thus provides a language to interpret how women come to accept unequal conditions as part of their 'choice' to consent.

Adrienne Rich's (1980) theory of compulsory heterosexuality adds another layer to this framework by emphasizing how women's sexualities are structured around male needs and societal expectations. Rich argues that heterosexuality is not just a sexual preference but a

political institution that enforces gender hierarchy. Her analysis is especially useful in contexts like Pakistan, where religious and cultural discourses construct heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate sexual arrangement, and where women's desires are often silenced in favor of fulfilling male needs. Rich's work enables a deeper critique of how women's subjectivities are shaped by cultural scripts that teach them to suppress their desires and give in to male sexual demands. It links to Foucault's and Bourdieu's analyses of power and subject formation, offering a cohesive lens through which to analyze the normalized inequities that characterize sexual dynamics in the lives of my interlocutors.

Chapter 1: Defining Consent – The Grey Zones

Consent, in its simplest definition, is understood as an agreement between individuals to engage in sexual activity. However, as my research revealed, the lived experiences of consent often exist beyond the rigid boundaries of 'yes' and 'no' that dominate legal and feminist definitions of the term. Many of my interlocutors described consent as a fluid, context-dependent process rather than a singular moment of affirmation. This challenges dominant feminist models of affirmative and enthusiastic consent, such as those discussed by Nicola Gavey (2005) and Vanessa E. Munro (2008), which advocate for clearer communication and mutual agreement but often rest on idealized notions of agency and rational choice. Gavey critiques how normative heterosexual naturalizes male desire and female subordination, making enthusiastic consent difficult to operationalize in practice. Munro similarly argues that even progressive legal frameworks can reproduce gendered assumptions by privileging verbal clarity over the complexities of embodied and relational negotiations. While important, these models do not fully account for the affective, social, and power-laden contexts in which sexual encounters take place, one of which context that my research foregrounds. Instead, my findings suggest that consent is often shaped by social conditioning, gendered expectations, and the unspoken norms of heterosexual relationships, making it far more complex than what existing frameworks claim.

One of the most striking aspects of my interviews was the difficulty that my interlocutors faced when asked to define consent in their own words. The absence of a direct translation for consent in Urdu is itself telling. Terms such as *raza-mandi* (willingness) and *manzoori* (approval) were sometimes used, but these words emphasize approval or permission rather than mutual, enthusiastic participation. This linguistic gap is reflective of a broader reality where sexual agency is rarely centered in discussions of intimacy, particularly for women. A participant, Mingle, expressed this challenge and said:

> When I think of consent in Urdu, it's *marzi* (choice) and *ijazat* (permission). Permission is like okay you can do it, and choice is okay I want to do this. I don't think we have a word that means what you mean by consent.

This distinction between permission and active desire highlights a fundamental issue: if consent is framed as something granted rather than mutually negotiated, it risks being understood as a duty rather than a choice (this is further discussed in the coming chapters as well). Feminist philosopher Emily Anderson in her article *A Phenomenological Approach to Sexual Consent*, critiques the dominant legal and academic narratives of consent and argues that they assume an idealized relational subject who is always aware, autonomous, and vocal about their desires (Anderson, 2022). However, my research demonstrates that consent is often shaped by unspoken expectations, emotional comfort, and non-verbal cues, complicating the assumption that verbal affirmation is always the clearest indicator of agreement.

Many of my research participants also noted that verbal consent does not alone capture the nuances of real-life intimacy. Instead, they described consent as an ongoing, relational process that is negotiated in the moment than explicitly stated beforehand. Hareem, while explaining what consent is said:

> So for me it's beyond yes and no and it's not only verbal. It's body language as well, the surroundings, are you comfortable where you are. All this also goes into consent. Like are you leaning in, or do you look hesitant.

Hareem's framing of consent aligns with feminist critiques of the "no means no" and "yes means yes" models, which assume that verbal statements are the primary indicators of willingness. Jennifer C. Nash in her article *Pedagogies of Desire*, critiques this assumption, and argues that desire and intimacy cannot always be reduced to explicit verbal agreement, as social and emotional factors often play a critical role in how people experience consent (Nash, 2019). My findings through this research reinforce this critique, showing that for many people, consent is a dynamic, evolving process rather than a fixed verbal contract.

However, this also raises important concerns. If consent is largely communicated through non-verbal cues, how do individuals navigate moments of hesitance and discomfort? Ripley, while talking about how she learnt about consent noted:

> We don't really talk about this openly. Like you are just supposed to know, but how? When no one tells us anything? And if you don't know, then you are figuring it out while it's happening and that causes even more ambiguity because you don't really feel good stopping your partner.

Olga Burmakova in her MA thesis titled *50 Shades of Yes: Feminist Re-Conceptualization of Sexual Consent as Affirmative, Communicative, Enthusiastic* argues that the feminist enthusiastic consent model assumes a cultural environment where open discussions about sex are normalized, making it easier for individuals to express their desires (Bumrakova, 2013). However, in societies where sexuality is shrouded in silence and shame, expecting individuals, especially women, to clearly verbalize desire or refusal may be unrealistic and unfair. This is particularly because open talk about sexuality is often considered taboo, immoral, or even dishonorable. This cultural framing not only discourages candid communication but also reinforces gendered expectations of silence, modesty, and passivity in intimate situations.

The enthusiastic consent model, widely promoted in Western feminist discourse, advocates for a fully affirmative, enthusiastic 'yes' in all sexual encounters. It emphasizes that consent must be freely given, informed, mutual, and reversible. Prominent organizations such as Planned Parenthood and RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) have played a critical role in promoting this model. They define consent as an ongoing process that must be clearly communicated through silence or lack of resistance (Planned Parenthood, 2023; RAINN, 2024). Educational initiatives such as "Only Yes Means Yes" campaigns have further mainstreamed the idea that consent is not merely the absence of a 'no', but the presence of a clear, enthusiastic 'yes'. While this model is useful in challenging coercive and ambiguous sexual interactions and has helped in raising awareness about sexual autonomy and healthy

boundaries, my research findings suggest that it fails to account for how social conditioning complicates how individuals give and interpret consent. Annie, for example, described how she sometimes found it easier to comply than to refuse, not because she was forced, but because she was conditioned to prioritize male desire over her own comfort:

> It's not that I didn't want to, but also, I didn't really think about whether I wanted to. It was just something that was expected of me, so I went along with it.

This experience was echoed by many other of my interlocutors as well. This challenges the idea that consent is always a conscious, enthusiastic decision or that the act of sex is necessarily based on desire, rather it is seen as an expectation. Elizabeth Groeneveld & Carrie Rentschler critique enthusiastic consent models for failing to consider power imbalances and the ways in which social conditioning shapes willingness. They argue that in contrast to affirmative consent, critical, ethical, and trauma-informed consent practice reveals power as something that is both always present and something that can be negotiated in relationship (Groeneveld & Rentschler, 2023). In contexts where women are raised to see sex as a duty rather than a choice, the expectation that they will enthusiastically say 'yes' overlooks the deep-seated pressures that shape their decisions.

Rethinking Consent through Ambiguities

The narratives shared by my interlocutors challenge the dominant frameworks of consent that rely on verbal affirmation and explicit agreement and reveal that consent is not a static or singular concept, but a fluid and context-dependent negotiation. Instead, their experiences illustrate that consent exists in, what I call, the grey zones, shaped by social norms, gender expectations, power imbalances, and internalized conditioning. The limitations of enthusiastic consent discourse become particularly evident in contexts where sex and desire are deeply regulated by cultural and gender norms, making open conversations about boundaries difficult or even impossible. However, while these personal and relational

complexities reveal how consent is lived, they also raise a broader question: How have feminist, legal, and cultural discourses constructed consent in the context of Pakistan? The concept of consent is not just a personal negotiation; it is also a political and ideological tool, shaped by legal definitions, feminist movements, and societal anxieties about sex and power. If enthusiastic consent presents an idealized version of agency that does not fully account for social realities, what alternative models exist? And how do dominant discourses of consent include, exclude, or regulate different forms of sexual agency? And then how do these discourses then shape what people believe consent should look like?

The next chapters build on this by further exploring how discourses about consent, whether feminist, media or cultural, intersect with lived experiences. Rather than treating consent as a fixed principle, the next chapters consider how people internalize, resist, or negotiate dominant narratives of consent in their everyday lives. These discussions then move us toward a deeper understanding of not just how consent is given, but how it is understood, performed, and contested in everyday life.

Chapter 2: The Stories We Tell – The Cultural Scripts of Consent

While consent is often imagined as a simple 'yes' or 'no', my research shows that it is shaped by broader cultural narratives that define what desire, duty, and intimacy should look like. During my interviews, I got to know that my interlocutors were exposed to gendered expectations of sexuality since childhood, often communicated informally under the garb of advice from elder women in the family, implicit and subtle lessons in religious sermons, and the idealized yet problematic representations of intimacy in films and television. These discourses, both explicit and implicit, create a framework through which people understand sexual relationships i.e. not as neutral acts between equals but as interactions shaped by power, propriety, and unspoken rules about duty.

Informal Sex-Talk

As noted earlier, out of my 14 interlocutors, 4 were married. A common practice discussed in these 4 interviews was the informal 'sex-talk' given by older ladies of the family to the bride-to-be a few days before getting married. My interlocutor, Mingle, narrated her experience and said,

> My aunt gave me a very subtle sex talk before I got married telling me to allow my husband everything as it is good for the male ego and if I don't say yes or be receptive, I will hurt his ego which can then cause problems in the relationship. Like I was told to comply. Like I didn't agree to that but it was how I need to be compliant.

Froggy, also mentioned a similar anecdote and said,

> The sex talk I got before I got married was mostly medical related stuff, like if I got rashes or have some pains what to do then if I start bleeding what to do then, no one really told me what to expect from the act itself. My mother also told me if you keep saying no to him, he will leave you because that's what guys are like. They want it and if you don't give it to them for a prolonged period of time, they will leave you. All the elders of the family kept telling me this and said for guys, marriage is 90% sex.

Both these narrations clearly highlight how these women were taught to see sexual activity as an act of service towards their husbands and the concept of consent is highlighted

as non-existent and instead is replaced by compliance. The women were told to comply for the greater good of the relationship, hence the absence of consent was central to the understanding of what women should do in a marriage. These findings align with Ussher et al.'s article *Negotiating Discourses of Shame, Secrecy, and Silence: Migrant and Refugee Women's Experiences of Sexual Embodiment* which focused on exploring the construction of sexual embodiment amongst migrant women from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, South Suda, Sri Lanka, India and South America resettled in Vancouver, Canada. Ussher et al. (2017) found that women in conservative societies often internalize discourses of shame and silence, shaping how they view intimacy. Women were often taught that sex is something they 'give' rather than something they actively desired which had "implications for women's knowledge and behavior in relation to sexual embodiment and sexual health, potentially limiting agency and causing distress" (Ussher et al., 2017, p. 1908). While the Pakistani context differs from the study's focus on migrant women, the overlapping themes of duty and obligation reinforce how patriarchal cultures shape women's expectations of sex as a service rather than a mutual agreement.

During the interviews, one other thing about this discursive practice surfaced which was that this informal sex-talk was mainly just given to women, whereas men were not told anything about what to expect and how to act sexually in an appropriate manner with their wives. This further complicated the gendered expectations around sex and intimacy. This issue was highlighted by Froggy, who stated,

> I asked my husband if someone talked to him about this before we got married and he said no, not even a hint. The only source men have in our society is porn which is bullshit to me, like it's so unrealistic and derogatory.

My only male interlocutor, Ransal, shared his experiences and said:

> Like when I got married, I didn't even imagine that I will even touch her on my wedding night and it was very awkward. But then the way she talked and the expression of her eyes, there was some attraction in them somewhere that I wanted to engage. I was very awkward sexually, because I had never been in

> a relationship and had never even touched a girl and then like in the generation before it was a system that your father or older brother would talk to you about this but now it is a given that boys know everything about it. I didn't even know what things I need to take into account to like not hurt her or make her feel uncomfortable. It took me like 4 days to prepare myself for these things.

Both these narrations point towards the discrepancy between the informal sex education given to men and women (at least amongst the individuals I interviewed). This is echoed by research carried out by Allen et al. focused on the issues of researching sexuality, culture and religion at schools in Australia and New Zealand. Allen et al. (2012) discuss how cultural norms dictate what kind of sex education young people receive and argue that sex education in patriarchal societies disproportionately targets women. This, in turn reinforces the idea that men 'already know' about sex while women must be 'prepared' for it. This creates a double standard where men enter marriage with limited or no knowledge about female pleasure, boundaries, and emotional needs, while women are expected to adapt to their husband's needs regardless of their own desires and needs. Men instead are more often left to learn from pornography and peer interactions, as noted in Froggy's narrative, which construct sex in highly unrealistic and hyper-masculinized ways. As highlighted in Ransal's account, men face uncertainty and confusion due to the lack of this informal education. Yet, rather than addressing this gap with conversations around mutual understanding and pleasure, the burden of sexual adaptation remains mainly on women.

Taken together, these accounts reveal how informal sex talk serves as a mechanism for maintaining patriarchal gender norms. Women are taught to be sexually subservient and provide sexual satisfaction, while men receive little to no education on consent or emotional intimacy.

Religion

Informal sex-talk was not the only form of discourse that came up during my interviews. Another fundamental aspect that was discussed thoroughly was the role of religion in defining and understanding consent. Chapter number 4, verse number 34 of the Quran states:

> "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand" (Surat An-Nisa' [4:34] - the Noble Qur'an).

This verse has been widely debated by scholars and feminists alike. Some argue that it prescribes a hierarchical structure within marriage, others emphasize that obedience does not imply coercion in sexual relations. Islamic feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002) have challenged patriarchal interpretations of this verse and argue that the emphasis on male authority has been historically overstated through patriarchal readings of the Quran. Wadud suggests that *qiwamah* (often translated as male authority) should be understood as a functional obligation rather than a moral superiority, and spousal relations should be guided by mutuality and not dominance. Barlas likewise stresses that the Quran does not endorse male sexual entitlement, and that any such interpretation must be seen as a distortion of its ethical message. Other scholars, such as Kecia Ali (2006), argue that classical Islamic jurisprudence often translated this verse into legal norms that prioritize male sexual access, yet she also emphasizes that modern Muslim thought is increasingly interrogating these norms in light of evolving understandings of gender justice and its link with Islam. These debates reveal that verse 4:34 is not a fixed or universally accepted directive but a contested site of interpretation, where questions of consent, obedience, and power are actively negotiated.

Along with the aforementioned verse, a Hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah was a major topic of discussion during my interviews. The Hadith states:

> "If a man calls his wife to bed and she refuses to come, the angels curse her until morning" (Sahih al-Bukhari 5193, Sahih Muslim 1436)

However, some of my interlocutors pointed out that interpretations often serve to deny women bodily autonomy, for example, Mennie, stated:

> I feel like marital rape is not treated serious in our society because people take refuge under the garb of religion. Like in religion, it is said that women are our lands and we are there to enjoy the lands fruits. But no one talks about, that if you want a good harvest, you need to work on that land and put in a lot of effort to actually prepare the land first.

Mennie's metaphor points to a belief system where women are viewed as property to be accessed, rather than as equal participants in intimacy. The commonly cited analogy of women as land reinforces a model in which men are the active agents i.e. those who seek, initiate, and enjoy, while women are passive, expected to comply and provide. In this framing, consent is not viewed as something that needs to be asked for or affirmed. Rather, it is assumed as a permanent entitlement granted through marriage. Moreover, the emotional or physical pleasure of women is rarely centered; men are understood as experiencing joy, while women are positioned as facilitators of that joy. There is little discourse around women's own desires or enjoyment of sex, which further marginalizes their agency and reinforces an unequal sexual dynamic within marriage.

However, for some women these religious teachings shaped their real-life experiences and negotiations of consent. Mingle rejected these expectations outrightly and stated:

> People keep saying that you can't say no to your husband like it's a sin and if you say yes, you are blessed and rewarded and what not, but I feel there's more to it and I don't believe in this part of the religion. Like I don't associate with reward and punishment, because I feel I am a human being and I can make a choice and I don't think I connect this with religion.

Froggy, also had a similar stance where she said

> For the religious influence, I feel like Islam has so many rights for women built into the religion, so I can't really accept that a religion which is very liberating for women can be so oppressive and violent on this particular point. Like for example, why would God punish someone like me who had vaginismus and who didn't even know about it and who kept saying no to her

> husband due to this medical reason, do you think that the angels would curse her? I don't think so, I don't believe in this

Both, Mingle's and Froggy's perspectives underline a growing rejection of religiously framed sexual obligations among women who prefer to prioritize individual autonomy over rigid interpretations of obedience. This shift may be linked to a broader socio-cultural change, particularly among urban, educated, middle-class women who are increasingly exposed to feminist discourse, mental health awareness, and rights-based interpretations of religion. Access to higher education, digital platforms, and peer communities that encourage critical thinking may also play a role in enabling women to question traditional teachings and reinterpret faith in ways that feel more just and relevant to their lived experiences.

Fofo, also stated that people usually don't dig deep into the meaning and context of the Hadith or Quranic verse and present their own patriarchal assumptions about it and said:

> Religion has a very toxic influence on this debate. Then people usually forget that marriage comes along with even more responsibility. And then that particular verse from the Quran[2] that says if a wife refuses her husband for sex, the angels curse her all night. This idea is very much perpetuated without even thinking if it is the authentic translation and interpretation. And people also use this to justify 4 marriages for example, if a wife can't fulfil your desires due to her having kids, or something else and if she is not that willing [to have sex] or you don't find her that attractive, a man should be allowed to get married again to fulfil his desires, women are reduced to a sexual outlet for men's desires.

Lilly too expressed her frustration with how Islamic discourse is used to limit women's control over their own bodies and stated:

> Religiously also people use that teaching that women are supposed to fully submit to their husbands. And in Pakistan nothing is devoid of religion, especially our cultural notions are very interlaced with our religious ideas and even the concept of *haya* (modesty), shame and pardah stems from religion mainly. Women are not allowed to take charge of their bodies at all. Sex has become a thing that men do to women. So, women don't have a say, a man is going to do it when a man feels like it.

Annie also said:

[2] Referring to the Hadith mentioned earlier in the chapter and not a Quranic Verse

> I do think that men use these quotes to their advantage, because they hide behind the garb of religion. Like if the wife isn't giving consent, take it by force because she is my wife. It's the same like very happily married men talk about marrying 4 times because its Sunnah. I personally don't understand things like these.

This aligns with Ziba Mir-Hosseini's essay *Sexuality and Inequality: The Marriage Contract and Muslim Legal Tradition* in the book *Sexuality in Muslim Contexts* where she makes a case to argue that Islamic legal traditions, as applied in many Muslim societies, often emphasize male sexual rights over mutual consent (2012). She further points out that feminist Islamic scholars are now arguing that such Hadiths and verses should be read within their socio-historical context, rather than applied rigidly in contemporary discussions around marital consent (Mir-Hosseini, 2012).

Nolie, expressed her resentment towards the use of teaching of sexual duty, shame and modesty (*haya*) to create barriers to openly discuss consent, pleasure, or refusal.

> People start misquoting religion that oh you should not disobey your partner. They take that particular verse out of context. And then women don't report this abuse because they don't understand.

Hareem, also echoed these views and stated:

> I think religion plays a huge role here, because Islam has this thing about modesty (*haya*) so topics like sex are not discussed and growing up no one really talks to you about it. And then you are more likely to ignore red flags because if something is happening to you, there's no one to talk to.

Fofo, also reverberated this concern and pointed out how Islamic discourse is often weaponized to suppress discussions about consent altogether and stated:

> Sex education might be the answer but our religion and our society, I don't know how will it allow for sex-ed to be introduced. But it's very important to humanize the female partner in this entire conversation. But I don't think sex ed at this point will work out in the Pakistani context, because the concept of modesty and hijab is so problematic, complex and it's all intertwined in our context

These perspectives highlight the tensions between traditional religiously sanctioned expectations of submission and the modern push for autonomy, agency and consent. While

some Islamic teachings emphasize mutual pleasure, ethical treatment, and spousal respect, the dominant interpretations in Pakistani society often prioritize male entitlement over female agency. Nina Hoel (2015) in her article, *Engaging Islamic Sexual Ethics: Intimacy, Pleasure and Scarcity* asserts that Islamic sexual ethics is an undetermined field, which is discursively produced and explores how it affects women's sexuality in the South African context. She argues that while Islamic teachings about sex emphasize pleasure and mutual consent, these teachings are often ignored or distorted to reinforce patriarchal control (Hoel, 2015). Similarly, Mulki Al-Sharmani (2018) in her article, *Marriage in Islamic Interpretive Tradition: Revisiting the Legal and the Ethical* critiques how historical developments in Islamic jurisprudence have selectively prioritized male authority, shaping the way consent is understood today. Fahd Zulfiqar (2017), in his article *Issues on Explaining Legal Recognition of Marital Rape in Islam in Pakistan*, argues that in patriarchal Islamic societies like Pakistan, men often weaponize religious teachings to subordinate women, hence creating a barrier towards legally recognizing marital rape. This was also reiterated by Ripley, who stated:

> In Pakistan, marital rape doesn't count as rape. And there's no concept of it. The concept of rape in itself is something that people want to get away from and it's an ugly word and then marital rape doesn't exist because he is a husband and he can have sex with his wife anytime he wants. And then people bring in religion and social taboo and then the discourse shifts in an apologetic way with things like will you make such a big deal out of such a thing and get a divorce over such a small thing? Even progressive women don't really understand this concept. It's seen as a right of a husband and you can't deny that right to him.

The responses from my interlocutors reveal that Islamic discourse around sexual consent is far from monolithic and can be interpreted in a myriad of different ways. While some of my interlocutors attempted to reconcile their faith with the ideas of mutual agency, others rejected the interpretations of obedience in sexual relations altogether. These narratives point towards a broader need to critically engage with religious texts and their application in modern contexts.

Movies & Popular Culture

Alongside the influence of informal sex talks and religion, the portrayal of intimacy in Bollywood movies and Pakistani television drama series was another factor discussed that shaped how consent was constructed, perceived and negotiated. For many of my interlocutors, these were the only sources through which they absorbed ideas about what love and relationships should look like. However, these narratives frequently reinforced harmful tropes that equate coercion with love and blur the lines between resistance and desire. One of the most common themes my interlocutors pointed out was the normalization of forced intimacy and marital rape in Pakistani dramas. Lilly, for instance, criticized how dramas fail to address the gravity of coercion and stated:

> A lot of Pakistani dramas show marital rape not as a social issue but as something that just happens. There was this drama, called *Ranjha Ranjha Kardi* [Repeating the name of Ranjha] and in that there was this married couple where the guy wasn't mentally fit and he forces himself on her and they have a baby and then they live happily ever after, yes, the forcing part is shown as a bad thing but eventually she forgets and moves on. Dramas also show forced marriages and marriages of convenience where it is shown that they had a baby because the man forced himself on the woman but it is never fully addressed.

Lilly's observations align with what Anam Fatima (2019) argues in her article *Representations of Women's Role in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis through Drama Serials*. Anam Fatima (2019) analyzed Pakistani TV dramas and their portrayal of women's agency and argued that Pakistani serials consistently reinforce the idea that women enduring difficult marriages and male aggression can eventually lead the man to fall in love with her. This perpetuates the idea that male coercion is a phase that women must silently endure and not resist, thus erasing the need for consent within intimate relationships. This romanticization of coercion is not only limited to marital relationships but extends to broader portrayals of courtship and love. Films and dramas depict male persistence as an attractive quality, reinforcing the belief that women's resistance is performative rather than genuine (this will be

explored further in Chapter 3). Nolie described how these media portrayals affected her personal life and shared:

> I had this long relationship and that is the time where I understood what intimacy is in relationships but my partner at that time would feel disrespected if I didn't allow them to even hold my hand or to give them intimacy. A lot of our fights were also because of me not allowing them to do anything. I used to verbally tell them no, or push them away or yelled at them, I became completely unresponsive but they just wouldn't understand because maybe this is what we are taught and shown in movies that if a woman says no, in her heart it means yes.

Nolie's account reflects the larger cultural script in South Asian media, where women reluctance is portrayed as a challenge for men to overcome, rather than a boundary to respect. The impact of these portrayals extends beyond fiction, influencing how people navigate real-life relationships. For example, Froggy shared with me how these media-driven expectations created a pressure in her personal relationship and stated:

> This is what is shown in movies, how romantic and sensual the first night will be but you are so tired by the time you enter the room that it doesn't happen and that leads to disappointment.

Wajiha Raza Rizvi and Maheen Imran, in their article *Televised Sexuality & Public Perception: Voicing the Taboo in Pakistani TV Dramas*, examine how Pakistani dramas shape public understandings of sexual intimacy. They argue that these narratives do not simply reflect societal attitudes but actively construct them by normalizing coercive expectations within marital relationships (Rizvi & Imran, 2023). Citing Ashfaq and Shafiq, they note that "Pakistani plays reinforce the patriarchal stereotypes of gender roles and strengthen male superiority in sexual matters" (as cited in Rizvi & Imran, 2023, p. 60). Building on this, they hypothesize that repeated exposure to such content may be dulling the public's sensitivity to gender-based violence. As they write, "channels were desensitizing the public to sexual harassment and sexual violence issues while creating awareness" (p. 66). However, the most disturbing impact of media narratives is perhaps the glorification of sexual violence as a precursor to love. Fapa stated:

> I feel like the dramas we see also play a huge role in normalizing marital rape and even rape, like there are many dramas on tv where a man rapes a woman, repents and then the woman is asked to marry him and falls in love with him. This is a common trope in Pakistani dramas.

Fapa's frustration reflects the concerns of Fatima (2019) and Rizvi and Imran (2023), who argue that such media narratives reframe rape not as a violent act, but as a dramatic turning point that leads to love or redemption. This portrayal distorts public understandings of consent and perpetuates dangerous myths about intimacy, gender, and power.

Ultimately, these narratives don't exist in isolation, rather they actively shape real-world understanding of consent. The stories that societies tell about love and intimacy matter, and in case of media consumed by majority of the Pakistani population, these stories often serve to reproduce and legitimize patriarchal control over women's bodies rather than challenge it.

Understanding Consent through Cultural Scripts

Building on the aforementioned narratives, my analysis aims to unpack how cultural, religious, and media influences collectively shape the complex perceptions of consent in the Pakistani context. Rather than being an isolated decision between two individuals, consent emerges as a product of deeply ingrained social structures that dictate gender roles and hierarchies. To critically engage with this notion, I turn towards Foucault's theories about discourse, power and subjectivity. Foucault (1976) conceptualizes power not as a step-down force but as something that is embedded within social relations, shaping norms and behaviors. This rejection of hierarchical power structures allows for an analysis of how consent is not simply imposed but actively produced through everyday interactions, practices, and cultural conditioning. For example, the informal sex-talk given to women before marriage functions as a disciplinary mechanism, training them to prioritize their husband's needs over their own bodily autonomy. The absence of an equivalent disciplinary mechanism for men further

reinforces the gender hierarchy, where female submission and compliance is normalized and male entitlement is naturalized. This disciplinary process also aligns with Foucault's idea about "docile bodies", which he argues, can be "subjected, transformed, used and improved to fit within larger structures of control" (1975). By what my interlocutors shared, one can observe that Pakistani women are socialized to embody these docile traits, where their bodies and their actions are regulated to fulfil societal expectations of submission and service. Discourse plays an important role in producing and sustaining these docile bodies. Foucault's theory about discourse focuses on how systems of knowledge define what is acceptable and natural. In the context of consent, religious and cultural discourses frame women's compliance as virtuous. For example, selective interpretations of religious texts emphasize women's obedience while neglecting mutual respect and ethical considerations, creating a moral obligation for the women to conform. These interpretations also emphasize that it is a man's right to demand sexual activity and that he is entitled to it. This entitlement is further normalized by media representation, where the media portrays marital rape and forced intimacy as forgivable and inconsequential. Maria Mansab (2024), in her research about marital intimacy and consent in Pakistan, further expands on these ideas and argues that media shapes cultural understandings of women's sexuality, as well as dissects the prevalent concept of the husband being a *Majazi Khuda* (metaphorical God). *Majazi Khuda* is a Pakistani phrase used to describe the status of a husband in the Pakistani society, where he holds the highest rank in his wife's life, it is believed that if a husband does not absolve a wife, Allah will also not forgive that woman and also that if Allah permitted a second *Sajda* (prostration), the wife would have been asked to prostrate in front of her husband (Mansab, 2024). This idea has largely affected gender dynamics and sexual rights attitudes in Pakistani marriages, hence proving certain discursive practices can influence women to internalize and embody servitude and submission within their intimate relationships.

This leads to the concept of subjectivity, defined by Foucault, as how individuals internalize these power-laden discourses and come to see themselves through the lens of social expectations. Women's subjectivities are shaped to prioritize male desire and dimmish their own agency. Through practices like the sex-talk, the enforced divinity of the husband, and cultural narratives that valorize male dominance, women often internalize these norms, perceiving them as natural and inevitable. Even when these norms are questioned, the deep-rooted internalization often results in their continued reproduction. This was also reflected in research carried out in Karachi, Pakistan in 2020, which claimed that "married women who were aware of the physical abuse in marriage did not consider sexual abuse as a form of violence" (Sarfraz et al., 2020, p. 55). The research further showed people did not dig deep into the issue of marital rape but rather just believed and advocated "the unauthentic interpretations by various sources" and also argued that "environmental conditioning plays an important role on perceptions of sex after marriage" (Sarfraz et al., 2020, p. 57). Hence, proving that women in Pakistan tend to internalize the aforementioned sexual norms leading to a state where they themselves are not fully aware about the importance of consent, further leading to many women 'giving' consent arbitrarily and not questioning the exploitative dynamic they are in.

As examined in the literature review, this position is echoed by theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, who problematize the very concept of consent and move our focus towards the exploitative power structures that lead women to 'give' consent. Andrea Dworkin (1987) in her groundbreaking work *Intercourse* makes a case about and argues that women can never freely consent to sexual acts with men in a patriarchal society. Catherine MacKinnon (2016) in her essay *Rape Redefined*, also takes a similar stance and asserts, "the presence of consent does not make an interaction equal. It makes it tolerated" (p. 440). Both Dworkin and MacKinnon critique structures such as socialization, media, etc. which lead to gender asymmetry in the society and trap women in the illusion that they have the power to

give consent. Rather, they argue that women internalize the ideals thrusted upon them by the society and have no other option rather than to say 'yes' to their male partners, while still believing the fantasy that they consented out of pure choice and free will. (this idea will be explored more in Chapter 3). This idea is not very different than that of Foucault, however, Foucault focuses more on the internal mechanisms of power that shape individuals into subjects who accept and perpetuate these exploitative structures. According to Foucault, power is most effective when its invisible, operating through everyday practices and discourses that mold behaviors and attitudes without overt coercion.

In summary, I have argued that the construction of consent in Pakistan is embedded in broader power structures, where religious, cultural, and media discourses work together to shape women's subjectivities in ways that prioritize male entitlement and diminish female agency. Women are not only socialized into submission through informal mechanisms like the sex talk, but also disciplined by religious interpretations that position obedience as a virtue, and influenced by media narratives that normalize coercion and male persistence. These mechanisms do not merely enforce compliance but ensure that women internalize these norms, reproducing them as part of their own identity. This discussion reveals that consent in the Pakistani context cannot be understood simply as an individual decision, it is socially produced and structurally maintained phenomenon that reflects deeper gendered power dynamics. The goal is then not to just redefine consent but to critically engage with and interrogate the systems that construct the very concept of consent, and recognize the fact that as long as these power structures remain intact, the illusion of choice will continue to obscure the reality of coercion.

Chapter 3: Consent in Practice – Dynamics of Guilt & Desire

While conducting my research, I was particularly interested in whether my interlocutors differentiated between consensual sex and desired sex. This distinction first emerged in an earlier conversation with Annie (see Chapter 1), who noted that she sometimes found it easier to comply than to reflect on whether she truly wanted sex. Her words stayed with me because they pointed to a deeper tension: that consent, particularly in conservative societies like Pakistan, often operates less as an expression of desire and more as a performance of duty, care, or relational stability. Going into the research, I expected that many participants, particularly women, might consent to sex without necessarily desiring it, due to internalized gender roles, marital expectations, or emotional obligations. I was curious to explore whether participants recognized this difference themselves, and how they made sense of it in their everyday experiences.

Some believed that there shouldn't be a difference between consensual sex and desired sex e.g. Tita said:

> I think there is no difference between consensual sex and desired sex. I think a big part of consent is when you desire sex. It's not something you are doing for the heck of doing it, if you are doing something for the heck of doing it then consent is blurred.

Hareem, also had a similar view:

> I think there shouldn't be a difference between consensual sex and desired sex, like sex should be consensual and desired according to me but I do realize this is not the case for many women in the society.

Both these Hareem and Tita pointed, although indirectly, towards the dilemma of defining consent within the constraints of an intimate relationship. This directly ties in with the discussion in Chapter 1 where I argue that consent is rarely a clear-cut 'yes' or 'no', especially within ongoing relationships where emotional intimacy, obligation, and social norms complicate how consent is communicated and understood. That chapter emphasized that

consent often unfolds in grey areas shaped by non-verbal cues, emotional context, and internalized gender expectations rather than through explicit verbal agreement. The interlocutors' reflections here reinforce this idea by showing how, even in situations where sex is technically consensual, desire and autonomy may still be compromised.

Many of my interlocutors resonated with the idea that consensual sex is indeed inherently different from desired sex e.g. Mingle, said

> Consensual sex is like if my partner asks from me and I will be like okay, like it's a baseline thing. But in desired there's definitely a different emotional quotient involved and definitely a different willingness involved. I feel desired sex is one step ahead of enthusiastic consent.

Mingle's use of the term "enthusiastic consent" is especially striking, as it shows how she was not only aware of feminist frameworks but actively positioned her own experiences in relation to them. By saying that desired sex is 'a step ahead' of even enthusiastic consent, she pointed to a deeper emotional and bodily engagement that goes beyond verbal agreement or outward enthusiasm. Here, she distinguished between fulfilling a request and actively wanting the experience suggesting that even sex that meets the criteria of "enthusiastic consent" might still lack emotional authenticity or mutual desire.

Froggy, married through an arranged setup, had a similar stance and shared with me the situation that arose when she first had sex on her wedding night,

> So, the very first time, I had no idea how this is going to work out. I did not know that it would be painful because the first time was very painful. And we hadn't really talked about it before our wedding night, since it was an arranged marriage. It was not like I didn't give him consent, that I did. I was willing but it wasn't actually desired sex but it was consensual.

While both participants clearly articulate the difference between consent and desire, Froggy's reflection also reveals how unfamiliarity, lack of communication, and social expectations shaped her experience. Her consent was given, but it was not rooted in informed desire, comfort, or mutual emotional readiness. These narratives begin to illuminate a broader pattern i.e. many interlocutors shared experiences where sex was consented to, not out of

desire, but out of a sense of emotional responsibility, marital duty, or wish to avoid conflict. While this may not amount to coercion in legal terms, it complicates the notion of what 'free consent' really means in intimate relationships shaped by gendered explanations.

This chapter builds on these insights by exploring how emotions such as guilt, as well as cultural values like modesty and silence around sex, influence how women negotiate and express consent. I will further argue that consent is not a singular, straightforward act but an ongoing, socially negotiated process.

Desire & Pleasure

While talking to my interlocutors about the differences between consensual sex and desired sex, a common theme we explored was about desire and pleasure. My interlocutors reflected on their own experiences with pleasure and shared with me how they understood these notions. Mingle mentioned how desired sex is

> Something you initiate yourself, somewhere where you enjoy more, for example, for me consensual sex does not give me much pleasure since it's just baseline and it's just for the partner like you are not totally into it, but in desired sex you are into it, you are getting a lot of pleasure out of it

Here, Mingle draws a clear line between passively agreeing to sex and actively wanting it. For her, pleasure is not an automatic outcome of consent but is closely tied to emotional presence and personal initiation.

Ripley shared her experiences with the same feelings saying:

> Consensual sex and desired sex are different and I have experienced this myself. You think you want to have sex and you are horny for it and when you are self-pleasuring you have these fantasies and you want to do it, but then when you engage in that act itself, you tend to become disassociated. A lot of women I know, including me, don't gain pleasure from sex but from masturbation. So desired sex is when you want to have it and consensual sex is act of having it and having pleasure from it and not disassociating and being fully present.

Ripley's reflection offers an important distinction: while masturbation may be tied to fantasy, control, and full bodily presence, partnered sex often involves emotional dissociation,

even when consent is technically present. What she articulates is a nuanced understanding of desired sex as embodied and self-connected, while consensual sex, in contrast, may still involve emotional absence. Her experience shows that sexual pleasure is not just about agreeing to the act but about the conditions under which one feels present, safe, and fully engaged.

Fofo, shared with me that she had never come across the term 'desired sex' in the first place but still tried to verbalize what she thought desired sex is and said:

> Desired sex is when you actually want to and you are actually aroused or you actually want to be intimate.

All the above-mentioned narratives from the data I collected point towards the notion that desired sex is sex by which a woman (or the women I interviewed) can draw pleasure from. The narratives shared by my interlocutors reinforce a clear distinction between consensual sex and desired sex, elucidating that pleasure is deeply tied to active desire rather than passive agreement. This challenges the dominant understandings of consent, which often assume that the presence of consent alone is sufficient for a fulfilling sexual experience. Instead, my interlocutors emphasized that desired sex is pleasurable because it is actively sought, while consented sex, mostly given out of duty or obligation, lacks the same emotional and physical satisfaction. However, some also shared that desire can sometimes build during the act itself, especially when they feel safe, respected, and emotionally cared for. For instance, Minnie, whose comments are explored in Chapter 2, used the metaphor of land and harvest to describe this process. She explained if men "want to enjoy the fruits", they must first "prepare the land", pointing to how foreplay, care, and attention are needed to make sex truly pleasurable for women.

Deborah Tolman (2015), notes that when women feel a sense of agency and emotional connection, sexual experiences are more pleasurable. Jackson & Scott (2007) also echo a similar point and criticize the societal expectation that women should perform pleasure rather than authentically experience it, emphasizing that pleasurable sex is deeply tied to genuine

desire rather than obligation or duty. Both Tolman (2015) and Jackson & Scott (2007) argue that women pleasure is maximized when sex is actually desired rather than simply consented to.

Guilt & Trauma

During my conversations with my interlocutors, a common feeling that came up was of guilt. Most women felt that it was their duty to serve their male partners sexually and by denying them sex or saying 'no', they felt guilty. This came up during the very first interview I conducted for this research with Alia,

> I felt really guilty for telling him No the first time, and the second time around I felt so guilty that I said yes, even if I didn't want to. And after saying yes, my body became so stiff.

Mingle, also pointed out how guilt was a driving factor in the expression of consent,

> When you are on your period, sometimes in your head you're like maybe your partner is missing out on something. It's just like if I am not around and I have gone on a work trip for like 20 days and when you come home you want to do something for your partner, even when you partner is not really expecting you to do anything. But I think its human psychology maybe. Like you start feeling guilt about it, like in certain cases. Or maybe it's out of love. Like you want to make your partner happy.

Here Mingle, tried to rationalize the feelings of guilt and duty with the feeling of love and care for one's partner. Ripley narrated a personal anecdote which clearly points out towards how guilt can be interlinked with not giving up control of a certain situation

> Once this happened that I started crying during the whole act and I started feeling guilt that he came from so far away just to see me and what it is about me, I mean I shouldn't' be focusing on myself and then we tried different things and I couldn't do them as well and then he suggested maybe I can give him a blowjob, again I was not comfortable with it but I thought that I have come to far now, why not just do it and get over with it. And then he convinced me a little and I ended up giving him a blowjob. I thought if I am not into it or I am not getting pleasure, then at least the guy should have some pleasure. And I think it's about pleasing a man and also about fear and anxiety about what if he loses control and starts screaming and being abusive, its better I give him a blowjob because by giving the blowjob, things and situation is still in my control. And then you eventually give consent for your mental peace that okay at least I gave consent.

Lilly had a similar anecdote

> In a relationship of mine, it was an underlying issue and it caused my breakup as well. Because I was operating from that sort of mindset that of course I have to give consent and have to engage in sex. And even if I ever turned him down, he used to ask me in a very guilt tripping way that if I am even attracted to him, or if I even love him or if I am cheating on him. And then I used to guiltily say yes [to sex].

The aforementioned examples illustrate how consent is not simply a matter of free will or coercion but is deeply embedded in emotional labor, relational dynamics, and internalized gender expectations. Rather than a straightforward 'yes' or 'no', these narratives reveal how women often navigate guilt, obligation, and power imbalances when making decisions about sex. Consent, in these instances, becomes a highly negotiated process where saying 'yes' is sometimes less about desire and more about maintaining control over the situation, preserving the relationship, or avoiding potential conflict. For example, Ripley's account does not only reveal the emotional pressure to please a partner, but also the fear that refusing him might provoke verbal aggression or emotional instability. Her account suggests that she perceived potential violence not just as a possibility, but as something she might even be held responsible for if she were to say no. This reflects cultural assumptions about male sexual entitlement and female responsibility for managing male emotions. Saying 'yes' under such conditions becomes a survival strategy, not an expression of desire. This challenges dominant feminist discourses that frame consent as a clear, enthusiastic moment—such as those advanced by Pineau (1989) and Beres (2007) which emphasize mutual communication and affirmative agreement. While these models have played a crucial role in shifting attention away from coercion, they often rely on the assumption that individuals operate within conditions that allow for open, autonomous choice. However, scholars like Ann Cahill (2001) and Fiona Jenkins (2017) argue that women often navigate sexual decisions within emotionally complex and socially constrained environments, where saying 'yes' can be less about desire and more about

minimizing harm, avoiding conflict, or preserving the relationship. These perspectives show that agency does not disappear under constraint, but takes different, sometimes quiet, forms.

All these personal experiences of my interlocutors led us to talk about traumatic experiences they have gone through, especially when their consent was misused.

For example, Tita narrated me this personal story

> When I came to university, I was dating this guy who I was not even dating for so long and I started getting pressured into it. He used to say things like "don't you trust me" "don't you want to do this for me" and I told him I hadn't done it before so it is a big deal to me. I wasn't using the word consent, and I wasn't really aware of it because I only had good experiences in the past. So, the pressure and then the anger tantrums like I was doing something wrong because they wanted to do it to me and I was not cooperating. This carried on for 3 or 4 months and then they pulled out one of their anger tantrums again and that too in an intimate situation. We were already in the midst of doing things, when they threw the tantrum and got mad at me for not agreeing and I agreed. And this was after months of him doing the same thing, and I agreed and it was painful and horrible and traumatizing. But I stayed with the same partner because I was under the impression, like for Pakistani girls it's a big thing that you've already done it with him and now I have to stay with him for the rest of my life no matter what happens, no matter how terrible he is, it doesn't matter what he has done to me, no one else will accept me.

This narration clearly highlights how differing understandings of consent can lead to experiences of sexual coercion, particularly in contexts where consent is neither openly discussed nor clearly defined. As explored in Chapter 1 & Chapter 2, in conservative societies like Pakistan, the lack of awareness and open discourse around consent creates grey zones, making it easier for coercion to be misrecognized or normalized. This, in turn, challenges dominant Western feminist discourses that assume consent is a universally understood and straightforward concept. Furthermore, Tita's experience underscores how discursive practices shape personal decisions and self-perception, as discussed in Chapter 2. Her belief that she was now 'bound' to her partner, despite the trauma she endured, reflects the powerful influence of social narratives around female purity, sexual shame, and the perceived irreversibility of sexual choices. In particular, the idea that a woman's virginity, once 'given', permanently ties her to that partner illustrates how subjectivity is constructed within these cultural frameworks.

This complexity is deepened when trauma enters the picture. Mark and Vowels (2020) in their article *Sexual Consent and Sexual Agency of Women in Healthy Relationships following a history of Sexual Trauma* explore and emphasize that consent is often an evolving process rather than a singular moment of agreement, depending on the dynamics of the relationship and the level of trust between partners. Their study emphasizes that trust, safety, and communication play key roles in how survivors express desire and navigate intimacy after abuse. This was reflected in Tita's experience of getting into a healthy relationship after suffering sexual abuse in her previous relationship

> Now I am in a relationship again, so the things I do. First he's very aware of the trauma factor and is very accommodative about it and every time we do something there will be a conversation about it before getting into it. Spontaneous sex is not something I engage in because of my past experiences. So, we talk about it before we start and then also your body language gives it away as well. Like if I am being touchy, then it means I want it. He also every time asks me like do you want to do it.

This shows how past experiences continue to shape how individuals express and experience desire in later relationships. Consent here becomes a slow, trust-building process—negotiated in steps, shaped by awareness of trauma, and rooted in ongoing emotional communication. The guilt aspect, however, was not just a part of how the women I interviewed construct their experiences, but the only man I could interview also shared his experience regarding guilt and intimacy,

> My wife is now pregnant and I feel very worried while being intimate with her, I sometimes even feel guilty for having sex whit her in this state but she always calms me down.

This shows how guilt plays a part, although different than it plays a part in women's experiences with intimacy, in how men experience intimacy and pleasure. This contrast in the experience of guilt between men and women is significant in understanding how gendered power dynamics shape perceptions of intimacy, consent, and obligation. While the women I interviewed largely associated guilt with denying or withholding consent, fearing its

repercussions on their relationships or their partner's emotions, the male participant's guilt stemmed from engaging in intimacy itself, particularly in a context where his wife's pregnancy made him perceive her as more vulnerable. This suggests that guilt in sexual dynamics is not just a personal emotion but a socially produced experience shaped by cultural scripts of responsibility, care, and control.

As shown in this section, many of my interlocutors described guilt as a central factor influencing their experiences of consent and intimacy. Some expressed guilt when they were not in the mood but felt obligated to meet their partner's sexual needs, while others spoke about the idea that prioritizing their own pleasure was selfish. This internalized guilt aligns with what Shick et al. (2008) point towards in their article *Safer, Better Sex through Feminism: The Role of Feminist Ideology in Women's Sexual Well-Being*. Shick et al. (2008) claim that women raised with traditional gender expectations are more likely to feel guilty when rejecting sex, making their consent more about obligation as compared to personal desire. This can tie in very well to the questions about agency in constrained contexts, which can be analyzed through Saba Mahmood's concept of agency within normative frameworks. Mahmood (2005) critiques the Western feminist assumption that agency is always tied to resistance, arguing instead that women exercise agency within the constraints of cultural and religious norms. Many of my interlocutors did not explicitly resist societal expectations but rather, negotiated their agency within them, framing their consent as a form of care, relationship maintenance, or emotional responsibility. This complicates dominant feminist perspectives that assume women must resist restrictive norms to be agents of their own sexuality. Instead, my interlocutors demonstrated how women make sense of constrained choices and navigate pleasure in socially acceptable ways.

The internalization of guilt and obligation is also closely linked to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is the process through which

dominant norms become ingrained in individuals' consciousness, making inequalities appear natural (1990). This can also be linked back to what is already been discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. The guilt that my interlocutors reported was not necessarily imposed through direct coercion but was rather embedded in the social fabric of their relationships. Kahtleen C. Basile (1999) in her article *Rape by Acquiescence: The Ways in Which Women "Give in" to Unwanted Sex With Their Husbands* theorizes about 5 different types of acquiescence and shows that women often 'give in' to sex under emotional pressure, persistent persuasion, or fear rather than free will. This aligns with what my interlocutors shared with me, especially Tita and Ripley and their experiences of 'giving in' after repeated requests from their partners or out of fear what their partner would do if they refused. These experiences were technically consensual but were not based on active desire. Such cases complicate dominant legal and ethical modes of consent, which often focus on verbal agreement while ignoring broader social and relational contexts in which consent is negotiated.

While most of these frameworks were developed in Western contexts, the similarities with my findings in Lahore are striking. Rather than highlighting stark cultural differences, this overlap suggests that the emotional labor of navigating intimacy through guilt and obligation is not unique to Pakistan. If anything, the resemblance challenges common binaries that frame Muslim majority societies as fundamentally more patriarchal. At the same time, specific discourses about *izzat* (honor), religious duty, and the silence around female sexuality may intensify these dynamics, making them harder to recognize or resist.

Shame, Modesty & Agency

While talking to my interlocutors about desires and guilt, I was also particularly interested in how they practice expressions of consent and sex alongside notions such as shame and modesty. While talking about if they would initiate sexual activity, Annie, told me

> I have never initiated sex because I feel shy And I feel guys find it very difficult to understand that sometimes you just don't want to do it. Like I have had guys ask me that it's okay it's just periods please do it with me. Again, I was brought up in a house where I saw my mom serving my dad so I always thought that okay I am not married yet so I can't take care of him like a wife, this is something I can do to make him happy so why not. And that is what the difference between consensual sex and desired sex, like I have said yes but my heart wasn't in it and I was not in the mood, I said yes because the guy convinced me, but it would be like a chore. If desired, of course I enjoy it.

She also told me

> So one time I was moving away a guy's hand and he thought I was being shy and modest and that I needed to be eased into it and when I refused 4-5 times, he started convincing me saying oh nothing will happen, it's all okay, please do it and then I gave in. and I was also always afraid of a negative reaction like if I say no what if they leave me, breakup or anything etc.

Froggy mentioned how men usually think women are shy and they just need to be convinced and said:

> The male gender has more sexual needs, especially as compared to us women. So maybe they think that we have the same extent of needs and we just need a push and we are shy to admit that we have the high needs.

Ripley pointed towards the role of socialization and discursive practices in how women are supposed to act

> We are told to keep our mouths shut, to be very ambiguous and shy and mischievous. And things like if a girl says no, it means yes. And if the bride doesn't say I do, her silence is taken as consent, even religiously it's okay. And even men are taught to be confused, kind off to show attitude sometimes, to not express their feelings. And open communication only comes when you yourself let go and overcome your shame.

All the above-mentioned experiences point toward how cultural notions of shame and female modesty shape how individuals perceive and navigate consent. Women are often taught to be modest, passive, reserved and are discouraged from openly expressing sexual desire, while men are socialized to interpret this silence or hesitation not as refusal but as part of the script, encouraging them to persist until the woman eventually gives in. In this framework, women are not positioned as active participants in sexual desire, but rather as its objects who are wanted, rather than those who want. Saying NO, not giving consent, or trying to avoid it is

seen as just how women are, whereas many of my interlocutors argued that it is not the case, they really did not want to engage in sexual activity but their resistance was taken as a sign of their modesty. This also impacts how women communicate their needs and desires, which becomes difficult in this case especially where a woman being open about her needs is perceived characterless. This dynamic reinforces a model in which male pursuit is normalized and female compliance is expected, further complicating how consent is understood and communicated in intimate relationships. These social perceptions can also be linked back to the discussion in Chapter 2 about the scripts around consent.

Hence, as shown above, my interlocutors reported that modesty and shame shaped their ability to express sexual desire, reinforcing traditional notions of female passivity in intimacy. Some spoke about feeling hesitant to initiate sex, fearing that doing so would make them appear improper, while others described experiences where their refusal was taken as shyness rather than an actual lack of interest. These experiences echo Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, where Rich argues that female sexuality is structured around male pleasure, with female desires often erased or repressed (1980). Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity also helps make sense of these dynamics, especially in the Pakistani context. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant, idealized version of manhood in any given society, one that values strength, control, emotional restraint, and sexual assertiveness. In Pakistan, this often shows up in the idea that a 'real man' should lead, initiate, and be in charge particularly in intimate relationships. Men are expected to take the first step, while women are taught to be modest, quiet, and wait. This creates a power imbalance i.e. men are positioned as active agents of desire and women are positioned as passive responders. As Annie stated: *"consent is thought as something that girls 'give' and men 'take'"*. Her statement reflects how common gender expectations play out in everyday relationships. When male persistence is seen as normal and female hesitation is interpreted as coyness or playfulness, it blurs the line

between desire and obligation. In such settings, a woman's 'no' is often not taken at face value, and the pressure to eventually 'give in' is strong. This shows how cultural norms around masculinity and femininity in Pakistan shape how people understand, express, and sometimes misread consent.

Navigating Consent through Emotional & Gendered Realities

This chapter has explored how expressions of sexual consent, desire, guilt, shame, and trauma are deeply embedded within broader societal expectations and gender norms. Through the narratives of my interlocutors, it becomes clear that sexual intimacy is rarely a neutral or individually autonomous. Instead, it shows that consent is shaped and negotiated through cultural scripts, relational dynamics, and internalized notions of decorum and decency. From hesitancy to initiate sex due to shame, to compliance driven by guilt or fear of abandonment, these experiences reveal how power, socialization, and emotional vulnerability intersect in intimate relationships. The recurring theme in many of these narratives is that consent is not a straightforward, singular act but rather it is fluid, evolving, and often shaped by context. As illustrated in Annie's and Froggy's accounts, women's refusals are frequently interpreted as culturally conditioned modesty that requires persistence rather than the denial of desire. This interpretation is rooted in gendered myths that equate female silence or hesitation with eventual willingness, undermining the agency of the person involved. Similarly, Ripley's reflections on socialization and religious norms highlight how both women and men are taught to avoid clear expressions of desire, creating environments where open sexual communication becomes difficult.

Importantly, these experiences also reflect what Gayle Rubin theorizes in her seminal work *Thinking Sex* (1984). Rubin critiques the societal structures that regulate sexuality through what she calls the sex/gender system, a framework in which sex is not just biological or personal, but socially organized and policed. In her view, acceptable forms of sexuality are

privileged (e.g., marital, reproductive, heterosexual), while other expressions, especially those led by women outside these frameworks, are seen as deviant or immoral. Rubin's notion of the 'charmed circle' is particularly relevant to my interlocutors' experiences. In this circle, only certain types of sex i.e. married, heterosexual, procreative, are seen as 'good,' while casual, queer, or female-initiated sex is pushed to the margins. This binary mirrors the cultural judgments that many women in this study anticipated or experienced when attempting to assert sexual autonomy. For example, Annie's belief that 'serving' a man sexually is a way to emulate a wife's role shows how sex becomes a currency of care, and how women's sexuality is valued primarily in service to men's needs. Moreover, Rubin's idea of sex negativity which is the cultural tendency to treat sex as dangerous unless justified by marriage or reproduction helps explain why expressions of female desire are so heavily shamed. For women, being open about wanting sex often threatens their perceived modesty and respectability. As a result, many participants described a disconnect between their internal desires and the roles they felt they were expected to play. Froggy's observation that men believe women simply need to be 'pushed' reflects this internalized expectation that women are less sexual, or only sexual in reaction to male desire.

The difficulty of navigating an analyzing these experiences become even clearer when some interlocutors described situations that blurred the line between consensual sex and sexual coercion. Muhanguzi's research about sexual desire and pleasure in women from low-income contexts in Uganda also points towards the idea that women in conservative societies internalize the idea that sex is not something they actively desire but something they 'allow' to happen to themselves (2015). Although Muhanguzi's research was conducted in Uganda, an entirely different context than Pakistan, but one can realize the similar difficulty in defining consensual and desired sex. The parallels between these contexts highlight how cultural discourses around gender and sexuality shape the ways women experience and negotiate

intimacy. This again connects directly to Basile's work on coercive consent where women technically consent but do so under relational and psychological pressure.

Ultimately, my interlocutors' experiences demonstrate that consent is not a singular, straightforward act but an ongoing, socially negotiated process. Their narratives confirmed that desired sex is more pleasurable than merely contested sex. While dominant discourses often present consent as a clear-cut concept, the narratives shared by my interlocutors reveal that it is deeply entangled with guilt, obligation, and the pressure to conform within intimate relationships. By centering these voices, one can note the complexities of navigating sexual agency in a context where personal desire is often mediated by broader social expectations. Moving beyond simplistic binaries of consent and coercion, these findings emphasize the need to understand intimacy as an evolving and deeply contextual phenomenon, one shaped as much by personal negotiations as by the structures that define those very negotiations.

Chapter 4: Feminist Movements and Awareness – New Shifts in Consent Understanding

While earlier chapters explored how cultural, religious, and interpersonal discourses shaped my interlocutors' understanding of consent, this chapter turns to a different set of influences emerging from feminist movements, online activism, and digital platforms. Scholars have increasingly recognized that digital spaces are not just places of interaction, but powerful sites where gender norms are negotiated and challenged. Gill and Orgad (2018) in their article *The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power: From the 'Sexualization of Culture' to #MeToo* argue that platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become key terrains for shaping public discourse on gender, power, and sexuality, particularly through movements like #MeToo. Digital feminist practices also allow survivors to share their stories, build collective knowledge, and reframe experiences of harm through supportive and political communities.

Many of my interlocutors noted that their early understandings of consent were vague and were shaped more by silence than by open dialogue. It wasn't until later, through exposure to feminist discourse online and movements like the *Aurat March* or #MeToo, that they encountered language and frameworks that gave shape to feelings they hadn't previously been able to articulate. This reflects what Baer (2016) refers to as "affective solidarity," in her article *Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics, and Neoliberalism* where online feminist spaces help people move from individual confusion to shared understanding and political consciousness. For many, these feminist spaces, although fragmented or virtual, served as alternative sites of learning, offering clarity on concepts like enthusiastic consent, coercion, emotional labor, and sexual agency. Just as importantly, they became spaces of community-building, where women could connect with others navigating similar struggles, break silences, and feel less alone in their experiences.

Alia, while walking me through the first time she understood the word 'consent' said:

> I think when the MeToo movement started, I was still at school that time when conversation around sexual harassment and consent started. There was this page on Facebook called TimesUp where anonymous confessions started pouring in where different girls from different schools in the country started posting about stuff their teachers had done to them, and how they were harassed during their CIEs exams.

Hareem, also echoed the same sentiment about feminist movements and said:

> I think feminist movements have a big role in creating awareness, like the slogan my body my choice alone has started so many conversations and has been a starting point for so many discussions around bodily autonomy. Even with MeToo, you were reading all these traumatic stories but even while reading all those, it was creating awareness.

Both of these reflections show how online feminist spaces became deeply formative for my interlocutors. Their stories resonate strongly with the observations made by Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) in their book, *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, where they argue that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram function not merely as spaces of expression, but also as "pedagogical arenas" where new feminist vocabularies are shared, normalized, and internalized. The authors stress that digital feminist activism plays a vital role in countering rape culture by naming injustices, amplifying survivor voices, and challenging dominant discourses around consent and sexual violence. For participants like Alia, feminist digital platforms provided a kind of recognition, what Mendes et al. (2019) describe as a moment "when survivors come to recognize their own experiences through the experiences of others" (p. 176). Alia's encounter with anonymous confessions on the *TimesUp* page is emblematic of this kind of affective solidarity, where public storytelling offers not just validation but also conceptual tools to make sense of previously incoherent emotions. This affective solidarity was also portrayed in Annie's account where she told me:

> I reach out to people who post on Facebook groups about their experiences, I feel like if I talk to them and I try to help them, I feel it makes me feel better about my past experiences. And also, I want to help people, like I got to know about consent so late which caused me problems so I try to reach out with the mindset that if someone can learn about consent earlier maybe they are saved the trouble.

This kind of resonance also mirrors Clare Hemmings' concept of affective solidarity, which she theorizes as a mode of feminist connection that emerges not from shared identity or presumed empathy, but from "affective dissonance" i.e. the unsettling feeling when one's lived experience clashes with societal narratives. Hemmings (2012) argues that transformation in feminist consciousness often begins not in clarity but in discomfort, when women feel a gap between how they are socially recognized and how they experience themselves. In this sense, Annie's urge to support other women online becomes an act of affective solidarity which is rooted in her own painful recognition of misrecognition, and in the desire to bridge this gap for others. As Hemmings notes, solidarity is not built on sameness, but rather on the political potential that arises from discomfort and the will to engage across difference not necessarily expecting reciprocity, but hoping for transformation. Furthermore, this nuanced view of feminist connection allows us to see the online engagements of women like Annie as more than acts of passive consumption. Instead, they are instances of politicized affect that push them into action and toward new understandings of themselves. For Annie, reaching out to others online isn't just about support but it is a way of re-authoring her own past experiences, making meaning of them, and refusing to let her trauma remain silent or isolating. Hemmings (2012) reminds us that "feminist solidarity, when rooted in affective dissonance, becomes a way not just to process experience, but to re-narrate it in relation to others" (p. 157). These engagements also reinforce that feminist knowledge-making often begins in emotional discomfort, confusion, or contradiction and that digital feminist spaces can become sites of collective processing and transformation.

While feminist movements and digital platforms have undeniably offered many of my interlocutors' tools to articulate their experiences and reimagine consent, these same movements, particularly in the local context, have also sparked polarization, discomfort, and backlash. The *Aurat March*, in particular, has emerged as a powerful yet controversial space

where questions of bodily autonomy, gendered violence, and sexual consent are placed unapologetically in the public eye. For some, this visibility has been transformative offering language, community, and political clarity. For others, however, it has provoked defensiveness, ridicule, or even fear of being associated with 'extreme' feminist positions. One of my interlocutor Ripley, stated that The *Aurat March* does not have the word marital rape in their manifesto and *"for good reason as they will be trashed and hated even more than they are"*. The *Aurat March*, hence has become a symbolic and contested site, where feminist demands are not only expressed but also challenged, both by broader society and, at times, by women navigating their own ambivalences around feminist language, respectability, and public dissent. Annie, for example, said:

> Feminist movements, I feel, have created a polarizing effect, like I know some people who after these movements are more aware but some on the other hand despise these movements saying that these organizations just make noise and once you are married, it's a job of the woman to have sex whenever her husband wants. And these movements have further polarized these two sides rather than bringing them on a common ground.

Minnie, also referred to this dilemma and said:

> Feminist movements have for sure created awareness, especially about bodily autonomy. But unfortunately, this awareness has touched only a few people. And also, if these movements are trying to say something, when that thing enters our social discourse, it loses its essence and the main point becomes lost. For example, my body my choice, was about bodily autonomy that no one can touch me without consent, even if I am married, he still needs to ask. But all of this was lost in translation and Chinese whisper[3], because no one has the ability to accept and understand it as is and actors such as religious parties or political parties used this tagline for their own motives. This is the reason I don't support these feminist movements in Pakistan simply because the point that they are trying to get across doesn't get across and it starts going against them. And then the debate of how women want to dance naked in the streets comes in, like people start engaging in this discourse in a negative way rather than focusing on the main point. And it doesn't trickle down to the women who are actually going through these situations of marital rape and violence and forced marriages and forced pregnancies.

[3]Chinese Whisper is a game where a message is whispered from one person to the next, resulting in the final version being significantly different from the original. Commonly played among children in Pakistan. Used metaphorically here to describe how information can get distorted or misinterpreted as it's passed along from person to person.

The testimonies by Annie and Minnie highlight the dual and complex reception of feminist movements like the *Aurat March*. While both acknowledge the awareness these movements have generated, they also point to the backlash and misinterpretations that often dilute or distort feminist messaging. Annie's comments illustrate how entrenched patriarchal expectations, particularly around marital obligations, become a point of resistance to feminist discourses, which are seen as disruptive rather than empowering. Minnie's reflection on the slogan *"Mera Jism Meri Marzi"* (My body, My Choice) being lost in 'Chinese whispers' echoes what Afiya Shehrbano Zia (2022) identifies as the "moral panic" created by opponents of feminist movements and argues that the backlash to the *Aurat March* emerges not just from conservative institutions, but from a broader anxiety about women's visibility, bodily autonomy, and political voice. Feminists, according to Zia, are portrayed as cultural threats or "assassinators of tradition" in order to delegitimize their demands. This aligns directly with Minnie's observation that feminist messaging is often co-opted by religious or political actors to create and increase fear and resistance, thereby polarizing the discourse further.

Zia (2022) also emphasizes how the media and state-aligned narratives often construct feminists as elitist and disconnected from 'real' Pakistani women, another concern Minnie raises when she points out how the movement's message fails to reach the women who are 'actually going through' marital rape, forced pregnancies, and violence. This critique is not a dismissal of feminist movements, but a call for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches that bridge the gap between radical demands and everyday lived realities. Using Zia's framework, the responses by Annie and Minnie can be read as reflective of the "strategic binaries" that emerge when feminist movements enter public discourse: empowerment vs. subversion, awareness vs. alienation, activism vs. respectability. These binaries complicate how consent and bodily autonomy are understood, resisted, or reinterpreted across various strata of Pakistani society.

Even as conversations around consent and bodily autonomy gain visibility through feminist movements and online platforms, there remains a noticeable gap in how such concepts are internalized, communicated, and practiced. Several of my interlocutors pointed to this disconnect, not just as a personal shortcoming, but as a reflection of broader silences in their upbringing and education. The discomfort around discussing sex, desire, and bodily rights was not simply individual but systemic, shaped by a lack of accessible, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive guidance. The question of how—and whether—sex education can exist within the social and religious frameworks of Pakistan was raised repeatedly, not as a radical proposition, but as a quiet yearning for clarity, language, and safety. Some of my interlocutors were in direct favor of introducing sex education in the curriculum, and highlighted its importance for future generations. Minnie, for example, said:

> I think sex ed is very necessary. And it should be done in a way that start with baby steps and then as the grade gets higher make it more advanced, like we do in other subjects.

A recurring theme that emerged from these conversations was the recognition that introducing sex education in Pakistan would likely provoke intense social and religious resistance. Yet, despite this anticipated backlash, many interlocutors emphasized the importance of such education being inclusive and non-gendered. As highlighted in Chapter 2, the burden of informal sexual socialization fell disproportionately on women, often mediated through coded advice from elder female relatives, leaving men largely outside these conversations. This unequal distribution of knowledge not only reinforces gendered power dynamics but also deepens the silence and stigma around consent and sexuality and leads to situation of sexual coercion and abuse. Tita, for example, emphasized the need for men in the society to be exposed to sex education and said:

> I think it's equally important for both men and women, because we are taught that a woman is there to satisfy a man's need, so for men sex education should be given to them in a way that they are told that this is the way you can harm

> a woman, don't do it and for women it should be given in a way that this is the way you can be harmed, so be aware of the situation you are in.

Lilly also echoed the need for a broader structural shift and emphasized the importance of integrating appropriate vocabulary and legal recognition into mainstream discourse. She explained:

> In theory, sex education should be introduced but I feel like it's a risk to introduce sex ed in Pakistan because it might just turn out like only women are the ones being educated that they have to serve their husbands and how to go about it. I feel like a more systematic change is needed rather than just introducing it in schools or colleges. I feel like legally we must have some laws and also add marital rape to the legal language of Pakistan. Like make it part of the language and legal discourse. Sex education then can be a mandated thing under it. I also believe it starts at home, but then again you can't really gauge it in the private sphere. I mean I can't even report if I have been raped by my boyfriend in Pakistan because why was I with him in the first place. We don't even have proper words in the Urdu language for such acts.

The reflections shared by Minnie, Tita, and Lilly articulate the deeply gendered and systemic barriers that hinder the implementation of sex education in Pakistan. Their comments align closely with what Chandra-Mouli et al. (2018) say in their report *Building Support for Adolescent Sexuality and Reproductive Health Education and Responding to Resistance in Conservative Contexts: Cases From Pakistan*, where they emphasize that in conservative contexts like Pakistan, introducing sexuality education is often met with resistance not just due to content, but because of how it threatens established socio-religious norms. For instance, Tita's suggestion that sex education should teach boys not to harm and girls how to protect themselves reflects the article's findings that "tailored messaging" and community-specific framing are essential for success in such contexts. Chandra-Mouli et al. (2018) advocate a "contextualized ecological approach", where the content of sexuality education is carefully adapted to resonate with local values, without compromising the core principles of consent, equality, and health. Lilly's critique that sex-ed could reinforce patriarchal norms if introduced without structural reform, echoes the article's concern that poorly implemented programs risk reproducing gender hierarchies rather than challenging them. The emphasis she places on legal

recognition of marital rape and developing culturally legible vocabularies for consent also reflects what Chandra-Mouli et al. (2018) call the "institutional invisibility" of gender-based violence, which must be rectified to make sex education truly meaningful. Moreover, the emphasis my interlocutors place on linguistic absence and shame, particularly around Urdu terminology for consent or sexual violence, aligns with the paper's findings that silence around sex is both a cause and consequence of resistance to education. Without addressing these absences through language, law, and public discourse any educational effort risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

However, not all interlocutors were in favor of introducing sex education; a few, including my sole male participant, expressed clear opposition to the idea, citing concerns rooted in cultural, moral, or religious values. Ransal said:

> I feel like sex education is not the answer because whatever our society has hidden, its good, but there should be some channel through where there should be awareness, but not explicit sex education. I feel like your upbringing also matters a lot, maybe more than formal sex education. Maybe something like I will show some physical intimacy in front of my kids or will make them understand that I need time with their mom, which is something our parents didn't do.

Froggy also said:

> I don't think introducing formal sex ed is the answer. Maybe it helps, but the chances are rare because I think our society isn't that evolved yet.

In contrast to those who rejected the idea of sex education altogether, several other interlocutors cautiously supported its introduction though often with significant reservations and anxieties. Their endorsement was layered with hesitation, shaped by a recognition of the societal, religious, and political barriers that would complicate its implementation. Many recognized the potential of sex education to destigmatize conversations around sexuality and consent, but simultaneously questioned its feasibility in the current socio-political climate of Pakistan. As Ripley noted,

> Sex ed should make things better but I feel with the current political situation in the country it's very difficult. I feel it will help destigmatize sex as a topic

> in the society. But it would take a lot of time to get there. I think maybe online informal forums can be used to create awareness.

Others raised deeper structural critiques, pointing not only to religious and cultural resistance but to broader societal failures to acknowledge women as autonomous sexual beings. Fofo said,

> Sex education should of course be introduced, but our religion and our society—I don't know how it will allow for it... women are so sexualized and objectified that I don't think sex ed will work unless, I don't know, a revolution comes about.

She further emphasized how the very concept of consent becomes distorted when modesty and obedience are inscribed onto the female body from a young age. Her account echoed a broader sense of frustration:

> We don't even have the language to discuss these things... girls aren't even taught about periods. A lot of women I know were just given a 10-minute sex talk before marriage where they're told to lie down and let the husband do whatever he wants. And then many women land in the emergency room after their wedding night with second degree tears because they were raped by their husbands on the wedding night.

Consent, Movements, and the Limits of Awareness

The accounts shared above reveal how discussions around sex education in Pakistan are laden with ambivalence, oscillating between hope and resignation. On one hand, there is a clear recognition of the urgent need for structured, inclusive, and non-gendered sex education, particularly in light of the asymmetrical informal learning highlighted earlier, where women alone are burdened with whispered codes of sexual conduct. Yet even among those in favor, there is a persistent skepticism about its feasibility within Pakistan's current cultural and political frameworks. Bilal and Leygraf (2024) in their article *The State of Sex Education in Pakistan: The Way Forward,* identify this tension as the "moral panic" which surrounds sex education in Pakistan, where attempts to introduce curriculum reforms are often met with accusations of cultural betrayal or religious insensitivity. As these scholars note, the challenge

is not just curricular but discursive. Public and institutional unwillingness to name, let alone normalize, conversations around sexuality obstructs even modest interventions. Moreover, the narratives collected here suggest that without legal recognition of violations such as marital rape or a shared vocabulary for bodily autonomy, formal sex education risks being co-opted by the very patriarchal norms it seeks to dismantle hence mirroring Lilly's fear that it may end up reinforcing compliance rather than enabling agency.

These reflections also echo Yasmin and Safdar's (2023) argument that in many Muslim societies, women's subjectivities are constructed through frameworks that prize silence, modesty, and obedience. In this light, Fofo's account about the instance where consent becomes unintelligible within norms of obedience, and where even mensuration remains taboo, underscores how sex education cannot function as a standalone solution. It must be accompanied by deeper cultural and legal shifts that disrupt hegemonic discourses not only about femininity, honor, and sexuality, but also gender and power structures that continue to shape whose desires are heard, whose boundaries are respected, and whose autonomy is recognized. When Ripley points to online platforms as informal alternatives, or when Tita proposes distinct pedagogical strategies for men and women, these are not just practical suggestions but reflections of a broader search for safe, navigable entry points into conversations that have long been silenced. What emerges then, is not a total rejection or endorsement of sex education, but an articulation of its possibility which is contingent on recognition, reform, and a reimagining of how bodily knowledge is shared and valued.

This chapter has traced the evolving understandings of consent as shaped by feminist movements, digital activism, and ongoing debates around the place of sex education in Pakistan. Through the voices of my interlocutors, it became clear that while movements like the *Aurat March* and the #MeToo have generated powerful vocabularies and affective solidarities, they have also provoked backlash and raised questions about accessibility,

reception, and misrecognition. Similarly, conversations around sex education revealed both a deep yearning for clarity and justice, and a recognition of the structural, linguistic and legal limitations that make reforms difficult. What comes through in all these reflections is a complicated mix of feelings caught somewhere between empowerment and resistance, change and pushback, being seen and staying silent. But within all this messiness, there are also moments of real shift; women putting words to things they were never taught to name, challenging ideas they once took for granted, and trying, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes quietly, to carve out space for their own wants, choices and control. As I move towards concluding this thesis, the question is no longer just about how consent is defined, but how it is lived, negotiated, and resisted within and against the grain of the social worlds my interlocutors inhabit.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate a profoundly complex yet socially underexplored question: how is sexual consent understood, experienced, and navigated in the socio-cultural context of urban Pakistan. Drawing on rich and emotionally layered interviews with young women and a man in Lahore, the research reveals that consent in Pakistan cannot be understood through simplistic binaries of 'yes' and 'no'. Instead, I argue that consent is a continuous, contextually embedded negotiation, shaped by interlocking systems of patriarchy, class, morality, religion, and postcolonial legacies of law and shame. Rather than offering a uniform interpretation, the narratives of participants showed how the act of giving or withholding consent often unfolds within precarious emotional registers such as guilt, shame, fear, confusion, and desire, none of which exists outside socio-political formations. The dominant legal and moral architecture in Pakistan construct consent as either irrelevant in heterosexual intimacy (especially within marriage) or deeply suspicious in non-marital relations. Consequently, many of my interlocutors struggled to verbalize their discomfort or violation, particularly in relationships characterized by emotional dependence, coercive gratitude, or social expectations of endurance.

Importantly, this thesis has not only exposed the limitations of legal and moral discourses around consent but also illuminated the affective and relational dynamics that uphold and sustain these negotiations. Consent, as lived and narrated by my interlocutors, was rarely a clear boundary but often a shifting emotional threshold that was drawn and redrawn based on fear, care, and power. As I argued, this grey zone, while often pathologized in dominant feminist debates, is not a sign of failure but a site of critical inquiry, particularly in postcolonial, Muslim-majority societies where sexual agency is systematically denied legitimacy. Despite the oppressive systems described, participants in this study were not passive victims. They actively employed strategies of resistance, humor, silence, digital

feminism, and community support to make sense of their experiences. Many relied on feminist concepts of "enthusiastic consent," "emotional labor," and "bodily sovereignty," often accessed via social media. These vocabularies did not always align with lived experiences but nonetheless provided important tools of self-assertion and collective meaning-making. The tension between knowing the language of empowerment and lacking the structural capacity to act on it is one of the most compelling findings of this research.

This study thus contributes to feminist scholarship by complicating the dominant, often Western-centric frameworks of consent. Rather than promoting a universal model, it insists on the need for contextual, affectively literate, and relational understandings of consent, ones that emerge from people's lived experiences, not just legalistic or moralistic prescriptions. It urges us to consider not just whether consent was given or not but how, why, and under what conditions.

One of the most urgent implications of this research is the necessity for comprehensive sex education in Pakistan. Consent must not be taught as a legal checkbox but as a relational, ethical, and emotional practice. Curriculum must move beyond anatomy and abstinence to include discussions of boundaries, power dynamics, emotional literacy, and communication. Such education must be contextually grounded and should engage with the lived realities of Pakistani youth, including those in religious and low-income schools, not just elite institutions. Moreover, this education should not replicate patriarchal and moralizing discourses that frame premarital sex as inherently shameful or corrupting. Instead, it must create a safe space for students to explore the ethics of intimacy, the politics of desire, and the consequences of silence. Teacher training programs must also be revamped to equip educators with the skills to facilitate such discussions without shame, bias, or evasion.

On the legal front, Pakistan must urgently reform its rape laws to recognize and address coercion within all forms of intimate relationships, including marriage. The absence of marital

rape laws not only legitimizes violence within marriage but also perpetuates the cultural notion that women's bodies become permanently available upon marriage. Furthermore, laws that criminalize premarital sex often deter survivors from reporting sexual violence, fearing they might be punished rather than protected. There needs to be a shift away from moralistic, punitive approaches and towards survivor-centered, trauma-informed laws that actually take into account how complex and messy consent and harm can be.

In addition, the digital space requires immediate policy attention by the government and digital platforms, especially because harassment, surveillance, revenge porn and slut-shaming disproportionately affect women. To overcome these, there is a need to prioritize data protection laws, feminist cyber ethics and digital literacy programs to ensure that online spaces become venues of empowerment rather than harm.

Media reform is another pressing concern. Pakistani television and film industry continues to portray coercion as romance and male aggression as a desirable, masculine trait. State and private media boards must be sensitized to these issues, and content creators must be trained to produce narratives that offer respectful, critical, and diverse portrayals of intimacy, conflict, and care. Media literacy programs in schools and colleges should be designed to equip students to deconstruct such representations and develop critical viewing habits.

Religious institutions and actors must also be involved in reshaping narratives around consent. Instead of framing feminism and Islam as inherently oppositional, scholars and activists can draw on progressive Islamic thought to build theological arguments for mutual respect, consent, and bodily integrity. Engaging with religion not only widens the audience for such discourses but also disrupts the monopoly of patriarchal interpretations.

This study is, however, undoubtedly partial and is limited by its focus on urban, cisgender, middle-class women in Lahore. Future research should explore the experiences of men, queer and transgender individuals, rural populations, and working-class communities to

develop a more intersectional map of how consent is negotiated across axes of gender, sexuality, class, and geography in Pakistan. Comparative studies between urban and rural youth, or between Pakistani youth and diasporic communities, could also yield important insights. Longitudinal studies are also critical. How do understandings of consent evolve over time in response to life experiences, marriage, parenthood, or feminist exposure? How do young men, particularly those who identify as feminist or progressive, understand their roles in consent negotiations? Are men also silenced by dominant gender scripts, and if so, how might their vulnerabilities be addressed without displacing feminist priorities? These are all questions that future research must engage with to build a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of consent. There is also scope for research on mental health, especially the long-term psychological effects of navigating ambiguous, coercive, or regretful sexual experiences without societal or institutional support. Trauma-informed therapeutic models, group counseling for survivors, and community healing practices must be studied, resourced, and localized. Finally, the role of digital feminist activism deserves deeper exploration. How do online platforms shape political consciousness around consent? What strategies do activists employ to resist state surveillance, moral policing, and digital misogyny? How do such movements create or fail to create inclusive spaces for queer, trans, and disabled people? These questions are vital to understand how digital spaces both enable and constrain feminist politics in contemporary Pakistan. Taken together, these directions point toward the urgent need for more inclusive, intersectional, and context-specific research that can inform both scholarship and activism around gender, sexuality, and bodily autonomy.

In closing, this thesis does not claim to offer definitive answers, nor can it. What it does offer is a set of provocations, a weaving together of voices, silences, contradictions, and longings that call for deeper listening and more expansive thinking. The question of consent in Pakistan is not just about sex or law or even feminism in isolation; it is about what it means to

be fully human in a society that so often treats bodies, especially female, as battlegrounds for moral, political, and familial control. The stories shared in these pages remind us that consent is not simply a matter of saying 'yes' or 'no', but a fragile, ongoing negotiation of safety, power, care, and vulnerability. If there is one thread running through all the voices in this study, it is a quiet but insistent desire for something more; for intimacy without fear, for relationships without coercion, and for conversations that are messy but honest. This is not just a personal longing but a political demand. Meeting that demand requires us to create space for it in classrooms, in courts, in homes, online, and in our own relationships. It means refusing easy answers and instead committing to the difficult, patient labor of cultural transformation.

What this thesis ultimately affirms is that consent cannot be isolated from the social conditions that shape how people live, and relate to each other and the world. To take consent seriously means to center the everyday realities of those navigating its grey zones, without judgment or abstraction, but with attention, empathy and political will. It means recognizing that power, fear, care and silence are not side notes to consent; they are often at the heart of it. The challenge going forward is not to perfect a universal definition, but to build the legal, cultural and emotional conditions where people are able to speak, to say no, to change their minds and to be believed in their experiences and feelings. That is the real work of consent; not just naming harm, but making space for safety, clarity and choice. It is difficult, uneven, and slow, but it is where the possibility of justice and care begins.

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