

Marriage and Family Conflicts in Pakistan: Indigenous Model of Conflict Management

Abstract

This article highlights self-regularity mechanisms of domestic conflict management in the marriage exchange system in Southern-Punjab, Pakistan. It deals with domestic conflict, its genesis and consequences. Grounded Theory Method is used for data collection and its analysis. We conducted 24 family case studies. The findings reveal that personal choices, love, and emotion play a minor role in mate selection, ultimately leading to domestic conflict. However, conflicts have a self-regularity system of the management. Contrary to the West, where courts decide conflicts, an elder of the married couple's family involved will negotiate and settle the issue based on traditional authority in Pakistan. Failure of conflict management attempts lead to a second intervention. Successful negotiations generate solidarity and social cohesion among relatives. However, unsuccessful negotiations lead to revenge or to continuing trouble. The article identifies indigenous domestic models of conflict management.

Keywords: *Exchange marriages, indigenous conflict management, Pakistan*

INTRODUCTION

This study is aimed at examining the issue of marital and familial conflict, causes, consequences and management, taking the example of exchange marriage system in the community of Kabirwala, Southern-Punjab, Pakistan. Exchange marriage is a system of spouse selection where two families exchange their daughter/sister for the marriage of their son/brother among cousins. It is not only about mate selection, but it is also perceived as a form of social security, alliance formation, family welfare, social cohesion and integration (Meek, 1936; Mauss, 1954; Lévi-Strauss, 1969;

Dr. Muhammad Zaman

Head, Department of Sociology, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad

E-mail: zaman@qau.edu.pk

Mr. Hassan Shehzad

Lecturer, Department of Media & Communication Studies International Islamic University Islamabad

Molloy, 1986; Cooper, 1983, 1983; Bourdieu, 1998; Bearman, 1997; Tapper, 1991; Zhang, 2000 and Kapila, 2004). It is a reciprocal system between two or among various families. Apart from spouse selection, all positive and negative actions are reciprocated simultaneously leading to serious domestic problems that are overwhelmingly neglected in the literature on the subject. In this study, we discuss domestic conflict which generates a chain reaction of reciprocity – positive or negative – among the families involved and affects the clan at large if not managed at the initial stage. This article deals with the emergence of conflict, its consequences and individual strategies to maintain individual interests in the kinship network within the system of exchange marriage. It also discusses social control, which affects the personal choice of spouse selection. How does the kinship and community manage domestic conflict? Finding out what kind of social mechanism is involved in order to manage domestic conflict within the cultural context of the Pakistani society is the objective of the article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on family and marriage sheds light on the stability of the institution and dispute settlement in domestic affairs (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). The major section of literature on the exchange marriage system has extensively discussed various dimensions of the system in different parts of the world. However, a vast portion of the research on exchange marriage system related conflicts undermines the importance of family disputes in the system of exchange in different parts of the globe. All the same, some research gives clues to the issue of family dispute and management with exchange marriages. Tapper (1991 pp.148) revealed the compensation strategy in exchange marriages, which eases or softens the enmity between two opponent families in Afghanistan. He also found that compensation marriages for conflict settlement are an integral part of the system of the exchange although the aspect of domestic conflict management or disagreement over the marriage arrangement per se is absent. Since the issue has a significant importance otherwise also, in the marriage and family institution, it deserves due space in the literature.

In China, Zhang's (2000) study highlighted the disagreements among parents and daughters over arrangement of daughters' marriages on the basis of exchange although this study only gave a brief description of the dispute. Family conflict management cases in South Asia are different from those in other parts of the world with some studies highlighting the issue (Lyon, 2004; Jacoby and Mansuri, 2008). Lyon's (2004a) study of a Punjabi village focuses on the conflict resolution and

gives a model of family conflict settlement. However, this study was unable to understand that conflicts in Punjabi villages hardly ever end. Family conflict always goes on in the form of a chain from one issue to another. Jacoby and Mansuri's (2008) view on the issue of domestic conflict management is different but significant. They found that exchange marriages promote welfare in the family system as a result of their revenge-taking nature. Nevertheless, both of these studies overlooked conflict management and it hardly came into the spotlight. Earlier, Das (1973, 1976) had examined the stability of the marriage institution in South Asia. Das (1973) argues that the Pakistani family institution is strengthened through marriages among cousins, and she found that this has been well documented in Pakistani fiction and literature. However, she did not design any specific model of conflict management. Relevant literature on the family and marriage institutions focused on family disputes and their settlement in general, with none of the studies exclusively exploring the indigenous model of family conflict management. Nonetheless, this indigenous model is tangible and so far is workable in rural Pakistan and in the wider South Asian region.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted fieldwork in Mahran,¹ a village in Kabirwala, District Khanewal Southern-Punjab, Pakistan. Our fieldwork was aimed at investigating the marriage by exchange system and we found some distinctive cases of domestic conflict and its management in 2005 and 2006. We used a qualitative approach, which is suitable for examining the cultural context of a phenomenon (Neumann, 1997) for the fieldwork. The qualitative method gives a comprehensive understating of personal relationships, subjective perspectives (Muller, 2000; Larossa, 2005; O'Brien, 2005) and conjugal relationships. During his PhD fieldwork, the principal author found various conflicts between spouses and among their families. In order to understand domestic conflict, it was important to know the nature of conjugal, family and kin relations, and the way they are related to or contradict one another. Therefore, we used Grounded Theory Method to gain an insight into the issue (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 2002 and Corbin and Strauss, 1990). We compiled 24 family case histories based on individual interviews (48) with exchanged couples, their parents and their children who were expected to marry in the near future. We developed categories and themes from these case histories through open, axial and selective coding (Neumann, 1997; Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 2002; Corbin and Strauss, 1990 and Strauss, 1987). We went into the field with the help of a

¹ Pseudonyms are used for the name of the village as well as respondents to protect the privacy of the respondents.

friend who introduced us to the local population. The principal author briefed respondents about the research objectives and received their consent. The majority of them were happy to give information. However, two female respondents refused to give information. The majority of the respondents were without formal education, but we also found some educated people.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Maqsood is a 38-year-old male married to Zakia (a 28-year-old female), who is his cousin on the basis of *watta satta* - exchange marriage (see Fig 1). However, the couple ran into problems after one year of marriage, which continued over two years. Besides many other problems, Zakia's job was a big issue. She was interested in a job, but Maqsood did not permit her to work. According to Maqsood: "She wanted to violate family honour. Look, her aim is to take control of my financial resources with this strategy, which I can't allow."

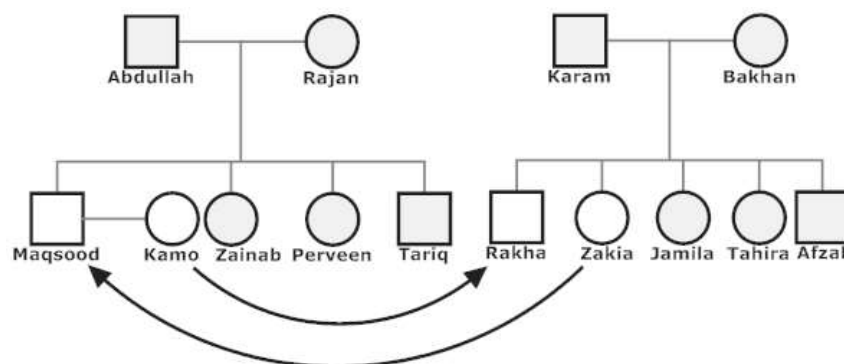


Fig 1 Maqsood and Zakia's case

Zakia argued: "I wanted to be an earning person, an independent woman and don't want to be merely a housewife. It was against the local traditions, and my mother-in-law is creating problems for me." In her view, this is the reason for her husband not giving her permission for her job. The couple quarrelled with each other on minor issues. On the other hand, Maqsood's sister and brother-in-law, also an exchanged couple, were happy with their marriage. However when Maqsood abused his wife because of minor domestic issues: in return, his own sister was abused by her husband. According to the exchange system, revenge is perceived as a legitimate action. The couples' close relatives (cousins, uncles and aunts) tried to negotiate and were finally able to reach a compromise and the issue was settled with the intervention of his father-in-law and a maternal uncle. The couples agreed on the condition that Maqsood will give money to his wife beside household expenditures and in return his wife will not insist on working outside the home. Zakia's mother-

in-law is still unhappy with this agreement. She says: “My daughter-in-law must be obedient to her in-laws.”

Kich Kich (unpleasant relations): Domestic lobbying

The notion of domestic lobbying soon emerged from data. *Sas te nuhn di larai* (conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) is reflected in folklore (Versa-Sanso, 1999). A mother-in-law enjoys authority over her daughter-in-law in the early years of her marriage. A bride is perceived as wise if she is submissive to her in-laws. She is supposed to care for her in-laws, especially the parents-in-law. In case she fails to fulfill her duties, this leads to disputes. Normally, a mother-in-law initiates conflict. According to a male respondent:

“*ye kich kich sas ton shuruh hoti hai* (a mother-in-law initiates these unpleasant relations). She abuses her daughter-in-law, lobbies against her in front of her husband as well as other family members.”

According to another respondent, “A bride compromises in this system, but not the mother-in-law.” However, some of them start lobbying their husband or father-in-law against the mother-in-law. The cold relationship between the mother and daughter-in-law becomes serious in a marriage through exchange system where the second couple and the in-laws reciprocate every positive and negative action. This conflict becomes a chain reaction between two families spreading this “*kich kich*” beyond two persons and families.

Shirkat dari: Strategic positioning

Strategic positioning determines a person’s status in social affairs in the family system of Pakistan. In case of conflict between his mother and his wife, the man has to take a position: either he sides with his mother or with his wife. One of the respondents termed this phenomenon as “*shirkat dari*” (opposition without any reason or logic). Some of the family members try to maintain neutral positions for a while. Others immediately become a party and find alignment with one of the opponent parties. However, due to the pressure of relatives, they may have to compromise on their personal desires.

In the conflict, the family uses strategies to manage the conflict. One of the strategies is negotiating with the couple or families to settle the issue. Relatives use emotional support or emotional control and the traditional authority of family elders/local influential, friends’ involvement in order to settle a domestic affair. The notions of honour, respect (Hussain, 2005) and family control over resources may

lead an actor either to be included or excluded if they do not agree to compromise. After a compromise has been reached, conflict may again emerge after a certain period of time. The case study below further confirms these claims.

Amin is a 33 year-old male with a B.A degree. His engagement was finalized in his early childhood with his cousin Shamim (a 20-year-old illiterate woman), in exchange for his sister Naziran, who was consequently engaged to Shamim's brother Sultan (see Fig 2). Amin and Shamim do not like each other. However, they had to marry according to their parents' wishes. On the other hand, Naziran and her fiancé Sultan liked each other.

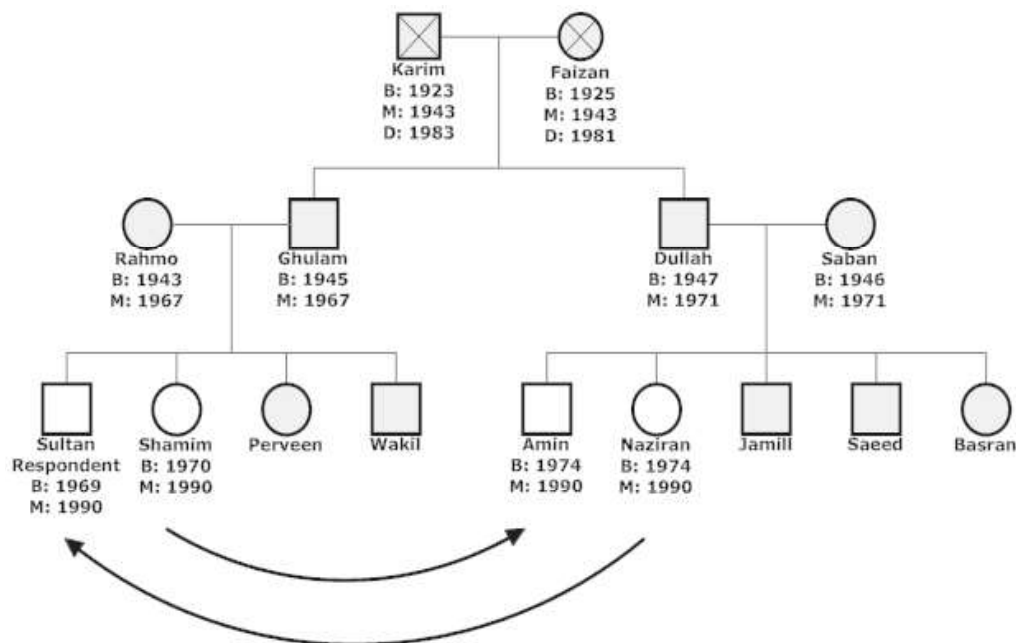


Fig 2 Amin's case of exchange marriage

Amin had to accept the marriage because of social pressure from his relatives. Further, there was a dispute over the dowry. Amin's family could not afford to give his sister a big dowry, but the in-laws demanded a dowry equal to the one they had given. Ultimately his uncles and aunts managed the problem. Having a difficult relationship with his wife Shamim, Amin did not have a child, which gave rise to further conflict between Amin's mother and his mother-in-law. Amin's mother blamed her daughter-in-law for not giving birth to a son. Argument between Shamim and her mother-in-law was a routine. According to her mother-in-law, Shamim spent too much money on her clothes and jewellery. In revenge, his sister's husband beat his own wife, who was Amin's sister. Shamim wanted to take the

matter to court, but his family believed that this would bring dishonour to them. Amin’s uncles and aunts stepped in, in order to solve the disagreement, and again a compromise was reached. After one year, Amin and his wife (Shamim) had another disagreement upon the birth of their first daughter. Amin believed that his wife was to blame for not giving birth to a boy. This disagreement spread to the second couple, which then played a key role in easing the tension with the help of relatives and arranging a *punchait* (local jury) to settle the issue. Still, there were tensions but the couples obeyed the words of their uncle and aunt, who would otherwise be angry. The traditional authority and control of the elders are visible in the both case histories, and are further highlighted in the third case history.

Akbar, a 40 year-old man, is a farmer who resisted marrying his cousin for almost 20 years. He reported: “I don’t like exchange marriages because such marriages are problematic.” He resisted and ran away to Lahore for 5 years. His sister’s marriage became a problem for the family because of this violation of reciprocity. His family and close relatives pressurized him repeatedly to accept the marriage proposal. Akbar’s family and relatives boycotted him due to his deviant behaviour. His family has been isolated from the *biradari* (relatives) due to “*shirkat dari*” since his refusal. He himself was totally isolated from the family due to his refusal of marriage. After 5 years, his brother and mother negotiated with his father and tried to settle the issue. Finally, he agreed to marry a woman with the help of the matchmaker. His parents arranged the marriage of Shazia, a 25 year-old female, with Akbar in exchange for his sister Sughra, a 29 year-old with Yaqoob, a 28 year-old man (see Fig 3).

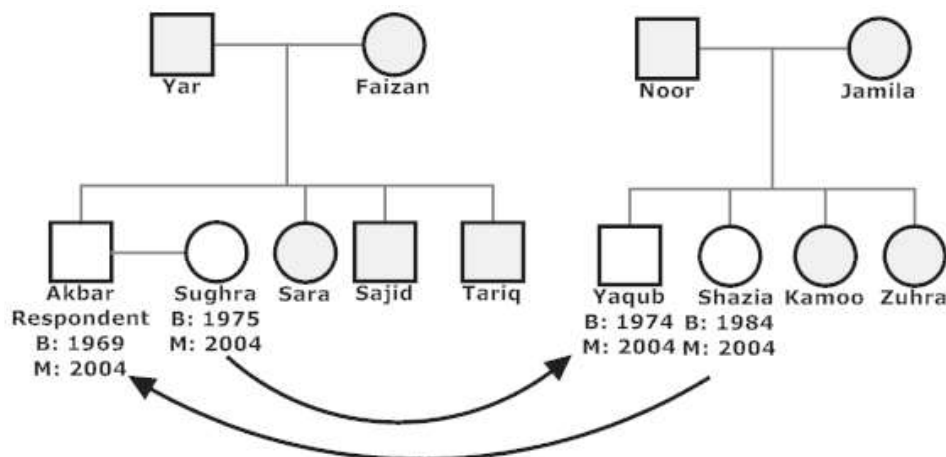


Fig 3 Akbar and Shazia’s case

There was a significant age gap between Akbar and Shazia. Although Akbar was not interested in exchange, he had to compromise due to his sister’s marriage. However,

problems emerged between the couples after one year of marriage, when Shazia got pregnant while Sughra did not. Shazia, an illiterate, declared that she could not give birth to a child unless her “*nand*” (sister of her husband) did the same, because it is matter of *watta satta* (exchange marriage). With the help of her sister (Kamoo), she gets an abortion without the knowledge of her husband. This became a serious concern for Akbar and his family, but they tolerated it. The next year Shazia got another abortion. This was unbearable for Akbar and his family. After the intervention of a *punchait*, both couples divorced, even though the second couple was happy.

Gharelo Jhagre: Domestic violence and control

Domestic violence is an integral part of the exchange marriage system in Pakistan which has been neglected or not seriously dealt with in the current literature on the subject. In the first case, Masood’s history indicates the traditional notion of equality: the notion of give and take was a strong cause of the conflict. Disagreements led to revenge and strong social ties with his sister limited him and his family’s stern action. Keeping in view the socio-cultural context of Amin’s case of exchange marriage, there were strong reasons for the marriage to take place. Pakistani parents, in general, do not like their children to marry outside of their own castes and families, since it is considered a matter of family honour and the ‘purity of blood’. This limits the choices of adult children for spouse selection. Therefore, they have to live with uncomfortable relationships and social gaps. For instance, Amin had received education, while his sister (Naziran) could not read and write. Similarly, Sultan was educated while his sister Shamim could not read and write. Meanwhile, one couple had many disagreements, while the other couple was happy with their marriage. The forced marriage produced domestic abuse and emotional problems for the couple. However, there was continuous intervention from elders, relatives and friends of the couple, who tried to manage the issue between spouses and maintain their relationship. This strategy was somewhat successful to manage the conflict in the above case histories. In the third case history, Akbar was deviant from the set patterns of spouse selection. He and his family became vulnerable because of his non-compromising behaviour at an early stage. Later he compromised but could not deal with the repeating conflicts and became the victim of tradition. He wanted emancipation from the traditions but the social structure and prevailing marriage patterns did not allow him to deviate.

Couples	Similarities among 3 case histories	Differences among 3 case histories	Reasons of conflict	Negotiators	Terms & conditions	Issue was managed?	Remaining consequences of conflict
Maqsood and Zakia	family control	Husband & wife have different level of education, cousin marriage	Control over resources, woman's desire for emancipation, mother desire for control	Father and uncle	Share in income with wife	Yes	To some extent
Amin and Shami m	family control	Husband educated, wife was not educated, no attraction at all	The couple do not like each other, but the second couple like each other, dowry	Uncle and aunt, friends	compromise	To some extent, still continues	To a great extent
Akbar and Shazia	A certain level of emancipation from family control, conflict	Resistance to cousin marriage, delay in marriage, inter-caste marriage	Individual's long struggle for emancipation	Mother, brother, relatives, marriage was arranged by a match-maker	Compromise on destiny and luck	Partially managed and still continues	Vulnerability

Fig 4 Traditional domestic conflict model

The causes for domestic conflict according to findings are: unequal dowry between exchanged brides, jealousy of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, desire for

control over the household and control of family resources. This includes the birth of children of the same gender in both exchanged couples, conflict over marriage arrangements, dowry, authority in household affairs and maintenance of social relationships. Conflict leads to domestic violence within the family, with the bride as a victim in this situation. When the husband becomes violent, he abuses and hurts his wife due to the pressure of the mother.

***Sulah* (agreement): Social mechanism of domestic conflict management**

Domestic conflict is a matter of family and the family does not allow any other person or institution to interfere in family affairs in rural parts of Pakistan. This is called *sulah* (loosely defined: agreement) in the local language. A respondent reported: “Relatives resorted to *sulah* with us. My family doesn’t like someone else to interfere in our family affairs”. However, if a family is unable to settle the issue, it proceeds through a number of processes. A person’s brother/sister or cousins will settle domestic disputes at the initial stage. If they are unable to manage the conflict then, parents, grandparents or uncles/aunts play the role of arbitrator/s. In case they are unable to manage the conflict, then there is a division within the family. This division of the families spreads to the *biradari* or neighbours and local influential individuals, who become arbitrators (Lyon, 2004a). Contrary to the Western jury system, at this level, a *punchait* plays the role of arbitrator, but this arbitration is among two or more than two families and not between two spouses or individuals. There is a possibility of violence erupting if there is division among the *biradari*. Unsuccessful negotiation at this level leads the issue to the state-run courts.

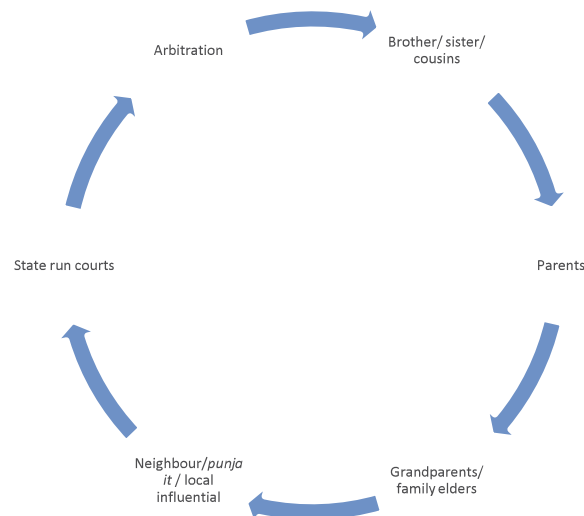


Fig 5 Conflict Management Process

However, this is not a core process of domestic conflict management. There might be some overlap or actions may start with the third or fourth step of conflict management. It may take on various shapes and therefore, the state-run courts might be called upon first to settle the issue in case of a serious dispute. Nevertheless, the dominant pattern of domestic conflict management is the same as discussed in the majority of cases (see Fig 5).

Cases		Input			Output	
Couple	Agents of conflict management	Tools of conflict management	Technique of conflict management	Success/failure	Available alternative strategy & its feasibility	
Maqsood and Zakia	Father & Uncle	Paternal authority, dependency	Reciprocal relations, honour & respect	Success	No alternative	
Amin and Shamim	Friends	Arbitration	Reciprocity with friends, honour & respect	Imposed success	External party involvement	
Akbar and Shazia	Relatives, <i>Punchait</i>	Arbitration	Reciprocity, dependency, emotions	Failure	Alternative available but Akbar does not wish to marry a cousin	

Fig 6 Domestic conflict management/ arbitration model

A person feels responsible for preserving his/her personal and family honour. It is a cultural code which, through social pressure, serves to maintain the marriage system; a conforming actor is rewarded, while shame is brought upon culturally disapproved behaviour. Social pressure compels a person to compromise on his/her dislike of the selected spouse and enforces the continuation of problematical marital relationships. This scenario generates one of two consequences: either retribution or compromise. Retribution is the awarding of a negative sanction or the taking of revenge on a person who does not conform to the social norms and values. The community *discourages* an actor to adopt deviating behaviour. For example, if an individual refuses to accept an exchange marriage, they in the first place have to face criticism. The community tries to maintain distance from this actor. This reduction of interaction is a sign of disapproval for an actor's behaviour. Disapproval leads to social boycott by close relatives of the actor and relatives do not invite the deviant person to social gatherings such as wedding ceremonies (just like Akbar's case).

This alienates the actor from the social network and he feels isolated and vulnerable. Contrarily, a conformist enjoys the support of relatives and is considered an important part of the family, enjoying respect, care and social security. For instance, Amin had to compromise on his marriage, even if he did not like his cousin, because of family pressure and dependency on the family. Akbar states that he married for the sake of his sister's marriage, and he is living the "vicious cycle" of the exchange marriage system. In return, he receives family support on various occasions. However, a non-conformist person has to pay a price. This price could be in the form of delay in marriage, mismatched marriages and unavailability of a spouse. The only way to social change is non-conformity. In this case a person has to face serious difficulties as illustrated in Akbar's case.

CONCLUSION

Lyon in his paper "Modelling Context in Punjabi Conflict Resolution" (2004a) argues that modelling context and environment as an agent reduces the analytical complexity through the identification of common structural patterns. His assumption looks relevant in a Punjabi cultural context. He used the context as an agent (ibid 2004 pp208). At community level, this context as an agent looks quite appropriate. However, we differ from him by using the term "conflict management" rather than "conflict resolution". Conflict resolution in the Southern-Punjab is hardly possible where it remains a part of a family and transfers to the next generation. It might be settled for a while but can emerge again. Therefore, conflict resolution claims do not really fit into Punjabi society. However, Das (1973, 1976) was right in her assessment of conflict mechanism in the Punjabi society. Her work gives a clearer picture of domestic affairs management as compared to Lyon (2002, 2004a), but she does not outline any clear picture of the conflict management model. Similarly, Jacoby and Mansuri (2008) found some hints of domestic conflict, but they consider it as functional in Pakistani society. Families in Asian societies are characterised by deep-rooted conflict due to the marriage by exchange system but also have a self-regulatory conflict management system with both working parallel in the marriage by exchange system.

This paper revealed the causes of domestic conflict, its mechanism and strategies to manage and resolve conflict within the given cultural context of the exchange marriage system in a rural community of Southern-Punjab, Pakistan. Normally, minor causes and social injustice breed conflict ("*kich kich*") that may turn into violence ("*gharelo jaghre*"). An exchange marriage related conflict does not only affect the individual but also becomes a source of conflict for more than two families. If one family fails to manage/resolve the conflict, it leads to a constant

source of tension and disintegration for the actors and clan at large. This chain reaction of conflict brings disintegration to the clan or associated families. The families react and control the conflict and there are various strategies for handling conflict. Approaches to managing and resolving a conflict vary from case to case. In some cases, multiple tactics are used to handle domestic conflict especially in the system of exchange marriages. One tactic is the indigenous domestic conflict management strategy which reduces domestic problems and is successful to a certain degree. There is a constant mechanism of conflict management in Pakistani society which ensures that a person in Pakistan is under social control and has to compromise on his/her marital affairs for the sake of the relatives as a result of domestic conflict management. A person can be vulnerable due to his/ her non-compromising behaviour. Sanctions are imposed on a person as a result of non-conformity through the traditional authority of the elders and relatives. This indigenous model of conflict management is centuries old and has hardly witnessed any changes. Intervention from the formal legal system and courts brings violence and leads the situation to deteriorate, particularly in rural areas of the country. An individual is subjected to following traditional roles and these roles are mostly imposed, but the family will look after the actor through his life, which is contrary to the concept of individualism in the West, and serves to control the damage inflicted to the fabric of society.

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