Family Size Ideals in Pakistan: Precarity and Uncertainty

Abstract

Increasing contraceptive use and awareness of the benefits of a small family has been amongst the primary activities of the Pakistan's family planning program. Despite their efforts, an ideal family size of four children has persisted in Pakistan for the last two decades. A significant body of literature has sought to disentangle and make sense of the dynamics informing these ideals in Pakistan. This work has highlighted financial insecurity, its effects on parents' aspirations for large families, and son preference. Missing, however, is an in-depth investigation of the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts in which family size ideals are embedded. We draw upon 13 months' worth of ethnographic data from a village in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to situate family size ideals within their wider sociocultural, political, and economic context. Our findings demonstrate that respondents' preference for larger families with several sons was an attempt to manage the precarity of daily life structured by regional conflict and violence, structural, intergenerational poverty, class-based exclusion from systems of power and patriarchy. These results allude to the importance of addressing the larger structural factors that contribute to large family size ideals.

Introduction

Established in 1965, Pakistan's family planning program has sought to modify the fertility behaviour of Pakistani citizens by increasing their contraceptive use and awareness of the benefits of a small family (Robinson, Shah, and Shah 1981). Despite their efforts, an ideal family size of four children has persisted in the country since the 1990's (Avan and Akhund

2006, National Institute of Population Studies 2013). This preference for a large family has contributed to Pakistan's slow contraceptive uptake and growing population, currently estimated at 207 million (Statistics 2017, Siddiqui, Jabeen, and Mahmood 2001). If Pakistan's family planning programming hopes to reduce family size ideals, it is essential to understand the considerations contributing to a desire for four children (Avan and Akhund 2006, National Institute of Population Studies 2013).

A significant body of literature has described the complex negotiations that feature in and contribute to, reproductive aspirations. Family size ideals are a reflection of the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts in which they occur, and as such, are informed by regional, national, and global histories (Greenhalgh 1990). A well-documented determinant of family size in Pakistan, and South Asia generally, is son-preference. Son preference is an outcome of a patriarchal gender order in which men are structured as providers and protectors, and women as dependents (Khan 1999, Mumtaz and Salway 2007, Boesen 1983). Pakistani women's access to material resources often relies upon men within the household, such as her husband, or adult sons (Boesen 1983). The patriarchal limitations to women's education and employment further necessitates their reliance on men for economic security (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000, Zaidi and Morgan 2016, Avan and Akhund 2006, Mussawar and Khan 2011, Mahmood and Ringheim 1997). In a structural sense, therefore, the higher value of sons is linked to their role in ensuring their family's economic security (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000, Avan and Akhund 2006, Mahmood 1992, Unnithan-Kumar 2010). In the context of a non-existent government social welfare system, families act as safety net against economic hardship. Couples seek to address the economic uncertainties of their lives, and associated social anxieties about an unpredictable future through many sons (Unnithan-Kumar 2010).

The importance of sons also extends to their role as a form of social capital and marker of social status (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000). Women, in particular, experience differential treatment within the community based on their childbearing pattern (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000). The birth of a son secures a young woman's position in her marital family, while garnering her respect from the wider kin network (Boesen 1983). A daughter-in-law who bears many sons may experience preferential treatment from her in-laws (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000). In contrast, women without sons experience verbal, and sometimes physical abuse, with the ever-present threat of divorce or her husband's remarriage (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000). As a reflection of the social capital associated with sons, the birth of a daughter is often met with sadness; in contrast, the birth of a son is celebrated with the distribution of sweets (Farooqui 1990, Winkvist and Akhtar 2000, Boesen 1983).

Material deprivation and social status, however, only partly explain large family size preferences. An additional element of uncertainty for which couples, in certain geographic regions in Pakistan, must prepare for is exposure to violence posed by the ongoing conflict and Taliban insurgency (Khattak 2012). The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan by NATO and its allies, in response to 9/11, marked the initiation of 'War of Terror' (Lieven 2011). Pakistan became actively involved in US operations in the region, which included combating extremist groups within Pakistan (Lieven 2011, Christine Fair and Jones 2009). The Pakistani Taliban, an alliance of autonomous Islamist groups, have been active since around 2007 (Lieven 2011, Khattak 2012). Approximately, half of these Islamist groups identifies as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), although even these allegiances are disjointed with frequent disagreements regarding territory (Khattak 2012, O'Loughlin, Witmer, and Linke 2010, Mustafa and Brown 2010). Notwithstanding this fragmentation, most recent estimates suggest that more than 80,000

Pakistanis have been killed as a result of terrorism between 2004 and 2013 with the most of these deaths occurring in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa neighbouring Afghanistan (Responsibility 2015).

Global evidence from South Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa suggests that the possibility of violence shapes childbearing patterns, which may be informed by the loss, or the possibility of losing children (Pell 2016, Varley 2012, Childs and Barkin 2006, McGinn 2000, Berrebi and Ostwald 2014, Urdal and Che 2013, Schindler, Schindler, and Brück 2011, Randall 2005, Agadjanian and Prata 2002). Emerging from regions experiencing both acute and protracted conflicts, this body of literature describes one reproductive strategy undertaken to replace the dead is increased child bearing (Schindler, Schindler, and Brück 2011, Pell 2016). Despite this global literature base, there is limited work investigating the role of violence and conflict in Pakistan on family size and fertility decisions. To our knowledge, only one study has demonstrated how sectarian conflict structures and shapes family size preferences and fertility behaviour in Pakistan (Varley 2012).

Missing from the Pakistani literature is a description of the role of the ongoing conflict with the Taliban and subsequent untimely violent deaths on family size ideals in Pakistan. Little is known what and which complex local and global geo-political forces that shape son-preference. The stagnating contraceptive prevalence rate, which has declined to 34% in 2018 from 35% in 2012-13 makes this question even more imperative. By providing an in-depth understanding of the factors that underlie the pragmatism of the family size decisions, the present study aims to inform Pakistani family planning policy and programming.

Methods

This study draws on a critical ethnography conducted in Nashpatai Kalay, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (name of village changed to ensure confidentiality). Data were collected over 13 months from September 2013 to April 2015. The first author, AA, with assistance of one male and one female research assistant collected the data in two phases. The primary goal of Phase one was to build rapport with the villagers and in the process generate an in-depth understanding of daily village life, in particular, collect information about the social structure of the village including gender, class, caste, and any other hierarchies. The primary methods used were participation observation and informal interviews. The research team took on the role of 'participant as observer,' whereby they participated in village life while asking questions and observing activities (Green and Thorogood 2004). As 'participants as observers,' the research team became a part of the community, engaging in *gham khadi* (sad and happy events) (Ahmed 2006, Grima 1992). Over a period of 2- months, they won the villagers acceptance, best indicated by voicing offence (*geela*) if the research team missed an event. However, there were limitations to the level of the team's participation, for the villagers were acutely aware that they were outsiders to the community. Nonetheless, prolonged immersion in the village and observing the subtle nuances of community interaction, the research team was able to access the unspoken knowledge and values that underlie culture in this context. A total of 242 participant observation notes and 109 informal interviews were recorded. During this phase, the research team also identified respondents for the next phase of the research.

Phase two of the data collection focused on understanding how villagers made family planning decisions. The primary data collection strategy of this phase was in–depth interviews. Ethnographic research is focused on generating a rich, in-depth understanding of the subject

matter (Hirsch 2008). As such, the research team prioritized understanding their participants' own views and experiences, and contextualizing family planning decisions within their lives. Although our focus was family planning, the respondents were free to direct the conversations in any direction they saw fit. Consequently we got data around respondents' family dynamics, social status, ongoing conflicts with other villagers or individuals, and perceived stressors in their lives.

A total of 76 participants (41 female, and 35 male) were purposively selected based on relative socioeconomic status, family size preferences, religiosity, and contraceptive use for participation in phase 2 of data collection. Participants underwent a minimum of two interviews with each lasting approximately two hours. A total of 197 in-depth interviews were conducted. The extended data collection period allowed the research team to witness changes in the participant's lives, including miscarriages, pregnancies, births, illness, marriage, and deaths.

Interviews were conducted in Pakhto. AA, as a woman interviewed female respondents and the male research assistant interviewed male respondents. Gender norms precluded AA from talking to men about family planning, a sensitive issue in this context. Where permission was granted, the research team audio recorded the interview. AA phonetically transcribed the interviews in Pakhto written into Roman script. Key excerpts were translated into English during the data analysis as needed.

Latent content analysis was conducted guided by the research objectives operating under a social constructivist epistemology (Mayan 2009, Miall, Pawluch, and Shaffir 2005, Elliott 2005). Social constructivism posits that reality is constructed through shared meanings and knowledge. The study, as a critical ethnography guided by a social constructivist epistemology, was attentive to the grand narratives that governed our respondents' lives. We focused on

interrogating the dominant discourse surrounding ideal family size by centering the lived experiences of the respondents. The analysis investigated systems of power and social exclusion such as class, caste, and gender and their role in maintaining a preference for certain family size. We also aimed to locate our respondents' family size preferences in their larger context. Open coding was first conducted through which distinct ideas and concepts were identified. Axial coding generated categories by exploring how codes related to one another. Lastly, the categories were grouped together to generate themes (Mayan 2009). Data were managed using Atlas TI.

Numerous efforts were made to ensure analytical rigor. Firstly, data were collected in two rounds. The first visit to the village was for a total of nine months, after which preliminary analysis was conducted. The second round of data collection took a total of four months, during which the emerging results were verified with the respondents and further probed. Secondly, extended immersion in the village allowed for a rich and deep understanding of the participants daily lives in Nashpatai Kalay. During the analysis stage, we paid special attention to issues of representation, and were careful to strike a fine balance between losing a voice and giving one too much power (Madison 2011). Peer debriefing throughout the analysis process with the research team ensured that points of views were not over- or underemphasized. Lastly, detailed field notes were maintained that documented decisions that were made and concepts that emerged throughout the data collection process.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Health Research Ethics Board and the National Bioethics Committee in Pakistan. Verbal consent for interviews and recordings were obtained before interviews commenced. Consent was also reconfirmed before the research team left the village. All personal identifiers from the data were removed and the name of the village was changed.

Results

Class, Marginalization, and Insecurity in Nashpatai Kalay

Nashpatai Kalay was a relatively new village created about 60 years ago. It was, however, shaped by a set of unique regional and class-based histories. The settlement was built upon land previously owned by a local landowner, known as the 'Khan.' The British had gifted the land to Khan's ancestors for their services to the colonial power. Standing water had, however, rendered the lands uninhabitable and unsuitable for farming. Khan used a desiccator to absorb the water, unearthing fertile farming lands. He then recruited a people, locally known as *hamsaya*, to assist with tending the land. Traditionally, the *hamsaya* are a low-status socially disenfranchised caste. Members of this caste are born to perform low status occupations such as *nai* (barbers), *gilkar* (masons), *qasab* (butchers), *daighmars* (those who cook rice), and *shah khel*.

The class and caste positionality of this group was marginalizing, and they had limited access to systems of power and influence. Like all low status castes in South Asia, they faced multiple oppressions, which are institutionalised in local social, economic and political structures. These include exploitative labour practices with members born to perform their low-status, low remuneration tasks. Their marginalization is furthered through a lack of access to high quality educational institutions, employment opportunities and participation in political institutions. Life as a *hamsaya* was precarious. If they fell out of favour with their landlord, they could be evicted overnight from the village. Within Nashpatai Kalay, one family had experienced such abuse in their previous village. One of the daughters had secretly married the son of the local landlord her father worked for. The landlord was outraged and forced his son to

remarry without allowing him to divorce our respondent's daughter as a form of punishment. The family was also exiled from the village.

A few years ago, the Khan of Nashpatai Kalay sold small lots of land to the *hamsaya* working his fields. These lots and the houses built on them now constitute the village of Nashpatai Kalay. The rented farmland from the Khan under a system locally known as *ijara*. Farming was the primary source of income for villagers although it was insufficient for many families. After paying land rent, little was left over and so many supplemented their income with unskilled, casual labour and some skilled labour. Jobs in the formal sector, particularly government jobs, were highly sought after, as they were salaried and reliable. Few obtained such jobs, since scarcely any had the required education and training, and those who did lacked the required social connections or money for bribes. These jobs were highly uncommon in the village, and if a man was fortunate enough to obtain such an opportunity, it usually required travel to Peshawar, about 2.5 hours drive. Of the 35 male respondents, only two had government jobs, both of which were low-grade jobs with little to no possibility for upward mobility.

The class positionality of the villagers was reflected in their lack of access to resources and development opportunities. They lacked the political capital to lobby for development in the village. For example, the neighbouring village had cooking gas connections, but the government had not provided any in Nashpatai Kalay. Instead of gas stoves, residents burned kindling and dung patties to cook their food. Electricity was available, but power was intermittent. In the summer residents often went up to eight hours with no electricity.

Nashpatai Kalay was also influenced by a particular geopolitical context which was characterized by insecurity and conflict. The village was located in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a region in Pakistan rife with instability. A long history of conflict and foreign

insurgency structured how my respondents thought about life and death, particularly violent death. Their memories of conflict extended beyond their lifetimes and were exemplified by collective folk songs and stories describing epic historic battles across the region (Abid 2008, Badshah and Khan 2015, Khan et al. 2015). More recently, though, many respondents had personally witnessed the influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan, first as the result of the USSR and US proxy war in the 1970s and 80's , and again after the recent US insurgency in Afghanistan in 2001 (Alimia 2013, Fielden 1998, Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 1988).

The insecurity in Pakistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular, was an ever-present concern that permeated the lives of the villagers. During the 13 months of fieldwork in the village, there were several Taliban attacks nearby, including an attack on polio workers and police escorts. The possibility of terrorism was a palpable reality for villagers. When the girls' school in the village was closed and the students were sent home, the villagers automatically assumed there was a threat from a suicide bomber. Many women shared their fears that their child may die in a random act of violence, and some invoked the 2014 Army Public School tragedy as proof that their fears were justified. The Army Public School tragedy refers to the TTP attack of an elementary school in Peshawar operated by the Pakistani military as retaliation for military operations in Wazirstan (Roberts 2017). This event resulted in the deaths of 141 people including 132 children (Roberts 2017). The appalling nature of such a large-scale attack targeting children emphasized the fragility of life for our respondents.

The precariousness of everyday life was reflected in the *akhna bakhna*, a traditional goodbye custom. Preceding an extended period of separation, it was traditional for individuals to ask each other for forgiveness for their mistakes. This behavior was rooted in the belief that God does not forgive trespasses against other individuals, unless the individual wronged forgives.

After asking forgiveness, one party would often say that death was unpredictable, but if we are still living then we will once again meet. For respondents, every goodbye was an acknowledgement of the instability of their lives.

Son Preference in Nashpatai Kalay

Our respondents indicated family size preferences of four to six. As expected, son preference was common in Nashpatai Kalay. Despite a stated desire for an equal number of daughters and sons, our respondent's fertility behaviour exhibited a powerful desire for sons. Their preferences reflected the social forces that shaped their daily experiences, which included a patriarchal context that limited the potential activities and utility of daughters. The following sections unpack the specific economic, social, and political considerations that influenced our respondents' preference for sons, and, in turn, family size ideals.

Economic Advantages of Sons

Economic precariousness, marked by poverty, and unstable and insufficient employment, was a condition common to life in Nashpatai Kalay. Like much of the region, agriculture was the primary economic activity in the village. Lately, agriculture had become increasingly insufficient to support a family. Many respondents were compelled to supplement their farming with other forms of employment; however, their class positionality limited their opportunities. As a result, most men worked in temporary, informal jobs and/or for daily wages, which paid about PKR 200-800 [$2.50-9.60]. These daily wage opportunities were characteristically inconsistent, brief and mostly seasonal.

Elderly woman: What is Abdul doing?

Middle-aged woman: Nothing. He is sitting at home.

Elderly woman: There are no jobs, there are no jobs, and now it is winter; everyone is sitting around, just like that.

Overall, there was a climate of scarcity, which furthered the uncertainty of their lives. Our respondent's blamed the state and the elite for the lack of opportunities. Nashpatai Kalay is located in close proximity of Punjab and our respondents were acutely aware of the differences between the two provinces in terms of resources and development.

In the car, the men were saying, that from Mardan onwards everyone is poor. There is no work, nothing. Khan didn't make a factory (Elderly woman)

As the "labouring poor," respondents experienced material scarcity that forced them to rely upon kinship and community networks. Children, and especially sons were, therefore, understood as the key to poverty alleviation. The economic value of sons reflected their ability to help their fathers. They started contributing to household income, when as young as 12 years of age, by for example tending land. Their financial contributions and assistance continued through adulthood, as many lived in joint family households in which sons brought their wives into their parents' homes. In a context where families had little to no savings or reserve funds, sons acted as a financial safety net for their parents. This net was particularly important as parents aged. Several sons contributing a percentage of a lower income was as lucrative as a few sons with high paying jobs.

Our respondents, however, cast themselves as poor in a notion that extended beyond economic scarcity. They understood their poverty in terms of a lack of access to power and voice. To be poor, was according to our respondents, to be in an *incomplete* state. The primary resource, which they thought could change their fate, were their sons. Participants waited in *anticipation* for when their sons would grow up and improve their family's standing.

Rich people don't have that much of a need [for sons]. They're complete, they're complete in every way. God gave birth to them complete…. Poor people are just in anticipation, in anticipation (Middle-aged woman)

Gendered Impact of Sonless-ness

The sociocultural significance of sons can best be understood by unpacking the social implications of sonless-ness. In Nashpatai Kalay, to be sonless was to suffer severe social sanctions, pity, and ridicule. Maltreatment often took the form of *paighor* which in the local cultural context were powerful insults with a resonance so strong that they invoked the desire to die or kill the offender. Sonless couples were given *paighor* in the form of the moniker "*meerat"* (heirless). In Pakhtun culture, the term *meerat* dually functions as a curse and form of profanity. It carries the symbolism of *ruin*, referencing the destruction of familial lineage, and economic downfall. It also carries a moral undertone; for, although participants overwhelmingly believed that the gender of one's children was the will of God, this belief was complicated by the conviction that sonless-ness reflected 'bad character.' Couples without sons were seen as morally deficient. They were repeatedly told '*khudai pejandaly ye"* (God recognized you) implying that God recognized their lack of character and deemed them unworthy of siring sons.

While both men and women suffered from such social sanctions, the form that these took tended to be highly gendered. Women, for their part, disproportionately experienced *paighor*, which was often delivered by their extended family. Those who lived in a joint family home experienced *paighor* from sisters-in-law almost daily. These *paighor* and the associated social stigma were emotionally painful for women. Every failed attempt to have a son, moreover, destabilized a woman's position within the household and shaped her interactions with her extended family. Her fear of her husband's remarriage grew with every daughter she bore. This

was exacerbated by the social stigma, which was often contradictory in nature: while community signaled to a sonless woman that the birth of a daughter should upset her, they simultaneously reprimanded her for displays of grief that they perceived as disproportionate. Wailing at the birth of a daughter was viewed as a demonstration of ingratitude which God punished with more daughters. As a result of these sanctions, some women actively strategized ways to avoid the negative social impact of sonless-ness. This included constructing themselves as a victim of forces beyond their control, drawing upon occult explanations, and blaming black magic and evil eye for their sonless state. Others restructured the significance of a daughter employing counter-readings that framed daughters as a harbinger of good fortune for the family. For example, several respondents believed that a first-born daughter would guarantee her parents' entrance to heaven.

Men experienced the social sanctions of sonless-ness in different, but also highly gendered, ways. Sonless-ness was considered emasculating, and the *paighor* men experienced insinuated they were impotent and unable to fulfil their socially constructed gender roles. In contrast to women, the impact of sonless-ness did not severely influence men's social status within their household, but rather, it lowered their standing within the community. Many in the community expressed sentiments of pity for men with many daughters. These sentiments starkly contrasted with the respect and admiration men with many sons.

> *For example, if someone has 2 or 3 children, then people say who? People have to tell them it's so-so's child. If you have 6 sons, then people say its so-so's father. They live like a king; my father was sitting on a throne. God gave him so many [sons] that they are spread over the country (Elderly man).*

These social sanctions carried real and often dire consequences. Although all my respondents experienced a common precariousness (Puar 2012), the father of few or no sons experienced heightened precarity. Beyond the economic implications of sonless-ness previously discussed, sonless-ness had implications for interpersonal relationships Sonless men had relatively lower access to power, and consequently, to respect—as was the case for one participant who had 13 daughters and was rarely invited to social gatherings. Moreover, in contrast to daughters, sons increased their father's community networks through their connection with other men in the village.

> *Whoever has daughters they don't really engage in gham khadi (happy and sad events). [They say] I have daughters, tomorrow they will get married and go to a stranger's house (Elderly woman)*

Violence and death

The precariousness of life in Nashpatai Kalay was characterized by an increased risk of a premature death. Violence, often caused by interpersonal conflict, the Taliban insurgency and state-led violence was the most often cited causes**.**

Interpersonal Conflict: Family Feuds and the Concept of Honour

Interpersonal conflicts with extended family or other community members were caused by a variety of issues, including disagreements about money, dishonouring female relatives, or acting in a disrespectful manner. While these disputes rarely escalated to actual violence, concerns related to the *potential* of interpersonal conflict fed into underlying discourse about the uncertainty of life and importance of having several sons as a form of protection.

Nashpathay Kalay was a context in which altercations, even between two individuals, automatically involved their families and kinship networks. An affront to one family member's

honour threatened to destabilize the honour of the whole family - in particular, an individual's paternal relatives (*tarboor*). For respondents, honour was a complex concept that influenced many different spheres of life. Cemented in the *Pakhtunwali*, a code of honour that guides the lives of Pakhtuns, honour was closely tied to male self-image and masculinity (Caroe 1958, Grima 1992, Boesen 1983). Although the articulation of the *Pakhtunwali* is subject to negotiation and contestation (Watkins 2003), for our participants, honour was deeply tied to their ability to take *badal* (revenge). They believed that securing the family's honour was men's responsibility (Boesen 1983). This was not, however, a purely individual obligation; maintaining honour was a collective and familial responsibility, and it was expected that a man's *tarboor* would support him during a conflict. When one respondent's son, for example, was involved in an altercation with a young man from another village, she shared fear that the conflict may escalate. Her nephew (husband's brother's son) was the most upset by the fight, his anger likely a reflection of his social obligation to defend his cousin.

> *Like if you have a car, you're driving a taxi, and someone comes to steal it…. And he shoots you, kills you. Then someone in your family will definitely take badal from them, that is unavoidable (Young man)*

It follows, therefore, that many respondents viewed having many brothers, nephews, and paternal uncles as a kind of protective force. Individuals were charged with safeguarding their *tarboor*'s honour even in death. If a family member was murdered, then their family would take *badal.* In many cases, this revenge could result in a *dushmani* (blood feud) that could span generations and cost many lives. If a family did not have many male heirs, their lineage could be obliterated.

Engaging in conflict was thus a calculated decision based on who had more *zalmai/zwaan* (young men), and, who might in turn have a competitive advantage. Men with many sons and brothers interacted with others in a way that reflected their strength based on their family size. Families that had many *zalmai/zwaan* were given liberties not afforded to families with fewer *zalmai/zwaan.* In turn, the *zalmai/zwaan* in a family reflected a man's ability to safeguard his family's honour.

Given that the number of *zalmai/zwaan* within a family was crucial as a means of protection, since they acted as a physical support system during conflict, a man's strength was described specifically in relationship to his sons. The phrase *mazboot* was used to describe men with sons, and this word called upon the imagery of something strong, heavy and unshakeable. Several sons made a man's *mla mazboot* (back strong) and *maat mazboot* (fist strong). The multiple precarities of life necessitated men to be firm, as their survival was predicated on a need to be able to prevail through conflict, insecurity, and poverty.

> *Well, sons make a man's maat mazboot, right? Tomorrow, when he looks at them, his heart is at ease, right? That, it's enough, I have sons. If there's anything, I have sons, right? (Middle-aged man)*

It is important to note the nuances distinguishing these phrases, which relate to distinct types of strength attained from sons. *Mla mazboot* referenced how sons supported their father through financial hardships, physical conflicts, and any other issues that may arise, while *maat mazboot* referenced the physical strength of sons. In contrast, men without sons were *spik*, which is the antonym of *mazboot* meaning light. *Spik*, has a dual cultural meaning, and was used to describe someone who has flawed character and insignificant.

Even as it was a primary means of protection, the *tarboor* relationship was also a potential source of conflict. A long history of land disputes had contributed to enmity and friction within *tarboor.* In Nashpatai Kalay, land was the key economic resource. Cultural norms, supported by interpretations of Islamic laws of inheritance, required a deceased man's land be distributed amongst his son, and, in certain circumstances, brothers. This often led to intergenerational disputes and enmity within *tarboor.*

> *Elderly man: Like, there was this guy who didn't have sons. He had his own house, everything nice. And when he had a son, other people came to congratulate him. But he said his own elder brother didn't congratulate him. He [elder brother] was thinking his brother will continue to be meerat (man without sons), and all this will be left to me, so there's that issue.*
>
> *RA: Okay, meaning his own brother was happy he was meerat?*
>
> *Elderly man: Yes.*

Respondents did not view the court system as an option to pursue land thefts. In fact, seeking justice through the legal systems was socially stigmatizing. Most people also did not have the resources or land titles needed to access the legal system.

The complex and often antagonistic relationship among *tarboor*, driven by resources, often structured fertility decisions. Having many sons was used a reproductive strategy to protect against land theft from brothers, although the next generation would have to deal with the resultant smaller inheritance which in turn further fueled competition between brothers. Nevertheless, a couple would consider the number of children the husband's brothers had when considering their desired family size.

Yeah, mostly it's our Pakhtun tarboor system, right? In it there's the thing, if your tarboor have a lot of sons, then your wife says I want a lot too. So that tomorrow if there's a fight, or if they do anything, we will be enough (Middle-aged man)

Insurgency and Conflict

Fears surrounding a premature death were exacerbated by the on-going Taliban insurgency, the war on terror and the state's response to it. As discussed above, these geopolitical realities were an ever-present feature in Nashpatai Kalay and the instability had become an "everyday emergency", a term which describes how precarity and the disruption of life come to constitute a new normal (Penglase 2009, Millar 2014). The conflict and associated fear had transformed into a begrudgingly accepted aspect of our respondents' lives. Innocuous daily activities such as the visit to the market necessitated a negotiation of the risk of an explosion. Visits to family members in other cities were subject to travel restrictions and road closures. Most participants could share a tragic story of a distant relative, friend, or acquaintance whose lives had been affected by the violence. For some, their male relatives were involved in regional clashes with insurgent groups. One woman, whose relatives had taken up arms against the Taliban, described in graphic detail the ensuing violence, the barrage of bullets, and the many who died. Other women in the village had husbands, sons, or nephews who were members of the police force or army.

Nowadays, they shoot people, kill people. Even the police are killed. And they are my children. They are killing my children. Who are members of the police? Aren't they my children? If my son isn't in it, her son isn't in it, someone else's son isn't in it, then where will the police come from? (Elderly woman)

In light of the geographic focus of the conflict, several of my respondents believed that they specifically, as the Pakhtun people, were being targeted. Most recently, these sentiments had erupted in the Pashtun Long March to protest the disappearance and mistreatment of Pakhtuns (Zahra-Malik 2018).

> *America and Russia are after them. It's because if there are no Pakhtuns then there is nothing. Look, only one group, Pakhtuns, have stood up to America, no Punjabis, no Sindhis, no one. (Elderly man)*

In response, our informants employed reproductive strategies that managed the potential untimely death of a son. They believed two sons, at minimum, were vital insurance against life's unpredictability. This protected them from being sonless if one son died prematurely.

> *What is two children? Death comes, yes God will take care of you, but what is one son, right? (Middle-aged woman)*

Our participants' reproductive strategies also reflected their demographic concerns of a shrinking Muslim population. Many saw Western promotion of family planning in Pakistan as an extension of their military intervention in the area, and an effort to weaken their population. Respondents framed their fertility as an untapped potential, which could produce great leaders to fight back against any enemies who sought to destroy them. They also believed that in contributing to the growth of the population, they were preparing for a possible attack that might decimate the population.

> *Yes, people will say there are lots of them. People will say it's a big nation. If there are a lot and there is a bomb, or something, the country will stay free. That's why we say, "why should we shut down my 'machine?'" We'll just continue to have [children]. (Middle-aged man)*

Discussion

Our data show family size ideals and son-preference in Nashpatai Kalay were the result of a negotiation of ideological and logistical considerations embedded in patriarchy, structural poverty and intra-family and regional conflict and violence. Son preference in Pakistan and its role in alleviating material poverty has been well documented (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000, Zaidi and Morgan 2016, Avan and Akhund 2006, Mussawar and Khan 2011, Mahmood and Ringheim 1997). Our findings, besides supporting the existing research on the economic benefits of sons, goes beyond to identify the many structural and systemic issues that contribute to son preference.

A key contribution of this research is the role of precarity in our respondents' lives and its impact on fertility decisions. Going beyond poverty and status, the research suggests risk of violence and insecurity had a major influence on fertility decisions. The ongoing Taliban insurgency and limited state-provided security from community violence constituted the backdrop for fertility decisions. Our study initiates a preliminary discussion of the role of violence on fertility behaviour in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. As a precursory investigation of these considerations, the research contributes to a body of literature that illustrates the complex ways conflict shapes fertility practices (Varley 2012, Pell 2016, Childs and Barkin 2006, McGinn 2000, Berrebi and Ostwald 2014, Urdal and Che 2013, Schindler, Schindler, and Brück 2011, Randall 2005, Agadjanian and Prata 2002). It builds on Randall's proposal that we must recognize the specificity of how conflict influences fertility by situating these behaviours within their historical, political, and cultural context (Randall 2005). We propose that further work is needed to unpack the role of interpersonal clashes, state violence, and geopolitical conflicts on family size ideals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Our study also demonstrates the importance of understanding, what Veena Das and Shalini Randeria refer to as, 'the slow knife of erosion of the everyday" (Das and Randeria 2015) and how it shapes reproductive strategies. The rural poor in Pakistan live precarious lives marked by health inequities, unstable income generation opportunities, debt, violence, and social exclusion. They improvise and innovate to address the uncertainty of their lives (Das and Randeria 2015). The family – with its affective ties and reliability - is the only avenue they have to manage the multiple insecurities of their daily lives (Millar 2014, Harker 2012, Butler 2009). Our respondents' reliance upon kinship networks can thus be understood as a fragile arrangement used to navigate the economic and political structures (Das and Randeria 2015).

Clearly, decreasing the fertility rate in Pakistan is contingent on addressing the upstream factors that contribute to the need for a large family. Our data suggest key amongst these in contemporary Pakistan are insecurity of life, interpersonal violence, the economic violence of poverty, and class-based exclusion from systems of power. These factors, however, remain largely unaddressed by current family planning policies. Ultimately, if Pakistani family planning programming and planning is to have any impact on the population growth, the state must first address the structural factors that contribute to family size ideals.

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