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Floods-Induced Displacement in Southern Punjab: A Qualitative Study of Late Adolescent Girls' Safety Challenges, Gender-Based Violence, and Coping Mechanisms in Dajal, Rajanpur

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Abstract

Despite recurrent floods in Southern Punjab displacing hundreds of thousands of families, the gender-based violence (GBV) risks, safety concerns, and coping strategies of late adolescent girls are largely underrepresented in disaster scholarship and humanitarian planning in Pakistan. This qualitative study explores these aspects from the perspective of late adolescent girls (aged 18-21) displaced by floods in 2022 and 2023 in the Dajal area of Rajanpur. The study takes a feminist disaster theory perspective, an intersectionality approach, and the social vulnerability approach, and relies on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 18 girls and analyzed thematically. The findings suggest three interrelated patterns: widespread insecurity and harassment threats in the poorly protected, overcrowded shelters, met with families limiting girls' movement in ways that reduced their danger and autonomy; the increased pressure to marry early, viewed by families as a form of protection from post-flood insecurity, but also a form of GBV commonly documented; and the use of family support, faith, and routine as key coping strategies available to girls, in the near absence of formal protection services. The study further states that in rural Pakistan, pre-existing patriarchal controls only get reinforced by displacement and that despite their resourcefulness, the girls' coping power is unable to replace structural protection. This process culminates in the recommendations for gender responsive shelter design, protection services, and a community-based approach for countering early marriages in the disaster response system in Southern Punjab.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence; Displacement; Adolescent Girls; Coping Mechanisms; Southern Punjab.

Introduction

The effects of climate change have exacerbated the impacts of flooding in South Asia, making it a social emergency alongside an environmental one that affects safety, the family support system, and social protection, especially in low-income rural areas. (IPCC, 2022; UNDRR, 2022) Pakistan is one of the world's most flood-prone nations. It

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has geography, monsoon variability, riverine systems, and sensitivity to climate change that all contribute to high-frequency, high-volume, and high-impact flooding events. The floods of 2022 alone displaced over a million households in Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Punjab, and affected over 30 million people (OCHA, 2022; NDMA, 2022; Mustafa, 2011). Ali et al. (2022) correlated both the magnitude of the 2022 floods and above-normal monsoon rainfall with glacial lake outburst events, which are related to climate change, and Eckstein et al. (2021) placed Pakistan in the top-10 countries with the highest climate-related extreme weather exposure globally.

Rajanpur district is one of the most flood-prone districts in the country, located near the Indus River and prone to flash and riverine floods in the monsoon season in Southern Punjab. Rajanpur is one of the poorest districts in Punjab, with high poverty, low literacy, and inadequate public service delivery (Ahmed & Siddiqui, 2021). Vulnerable families are repeatedly displaced in areas like Dajal to camps, open spaces, and family members' homes, where safety, privacy, and protection are not guaranteed. Populations are not equally impacted by disasters. In addition, feminist and disaster scholarship has long maintained that hazards do not cause vulnerability, but rather exacerbate social inequalities that already exist (Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Wisner et al., 2004). Gender, age, and rural location determine who has an increased risk of experiencing violence, who is limited in their mobility, and whose coping capacities are acknowledged or disregarded by relief systems.

Late adolescent girls, those between 18 and 21, are especially vulnerable to this process. The literature on the displacement of women during flooding in Pakistan has often treated women or children as categories as a whole, thereby not adequately capturing the specific risk of flooding and coping needs of these age groups. This is an important gap in evidence: When young women are considered for marriage and have tertiary responsibility for care of the household, they are also young enough to be included in the "women's needs" or "children's needs" categories in relief work planning, without being targeted as a priority. National-level disaster assessments such as the post-disaster needs assessments conducted after the 2022 floods often categorize displacement, housing loss, and livelihood disruption at the aggregate or household level without breaking down the figures by age and marital status under the term "women and girls" (NDMA, 2022; OCHA, 2022). This aggregation blurs the particular set of risks that an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old girl is exposed to when she's in a crowded camp, proposing marriage to her boyfriend, and has limited mobility, at the same time a set of risks that this study aims to expose. The study is restricted to late adolescent girls aged 18-21 years who were displaced because of the flood in 2022 and/or 2023 in the town of Dajal, Rajanpur. It is not a statement of the experience of younger adolescents, adult women, or the males in the household; neither does it go beyond this one locality. It is particularly focused on safety, gender-based violence risk, coping strategies, and not physical or menstrual health

outcomes, beyond the analytic scope. The selection of these boundaries was carefully made to enable a detailed analysis of a specific, under-represented dimension of displacement, rather than a survey-type analysis of a number of different types and outcomes. This study is important as it provides evidence-based, first-person data specifically on GBV risks, safety, and coping among late adolescent girls, which are not typically included in national disaster assessments and studies, and is conducted in a rural community in Southern Punjab. It is important to conceive GBV risk, restricted mobility, marriage pressure, and coping mechanisms as interlinked issues, as this provides a more coherent picture that can be directly linked to the design of GBV-responsive shelters, protection programs, and prevention of early marriage at the community level in the context of coping for girls in Southern Punjab.

The study aims to understand the gender-based violence risks and safety concerns faced by late adolescent girls during and after displacement in Dajal, Rajanpur, as well as how displacement is related to the pressure to marry early as a specific form of gender-based violence, and the coping responses that girls resort to during displacement when dealing with insecurity and limited autonomy. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed: (RQ1) What are the gender-based violence and safety issues of late adolescent girls in the context of flood displacement and return? (RQ2) In what way does displacement cause pressure towards early marriage in this group? (RQ3) What coping strategies do girls use to cope with these challenges, and what do these indicate about the lack of formal disaster response?

Strengths and Limitations

Although the study is geographically limited, it has a number of strengths. The narrow focus on late adolescent girls - and not on women and/or children as a general group - enables depth and specificity in disaster assessment that is uncommon on a national level. This intentional diversity in marital status, household composition, and shelter type enabled the analysis to reveal rather than mask variation in the experience of safety risk and coping within one, geographically clustered sample of displaced people, rather than painting a picture of displacement as a uniform experience. Finally, the trauma-sensitive approach to the interviews and the use of the participants' preferred languages promoted candid disclosure on the issues that were discussed (harassment, restricted mobility, and marriage pressure), which are issues that are not always captured in more formal or quantitative methods of data collection. However, as it is a qualitative study based on 18 participants in one locality, statistical generalization to other flood-affected girls in Pakistan and South Asia is not possible, and the findings are based on retrospective self-report influenced by the conservative, rural context of Dajal. The study is analytically transferable because the structural conditions that identified here gendered mobility restriction, marriage pressure under economic and safety stress, and informalized

protection are plausible in other rural conservative settings where flood exposure is high in Pakistan, and warrant further comparative and longitudinal research.

Review of the Literature

Gendered Dimensions of Disaster Vulnerability

Research shows that women and girls are exposed to disaster-related risks in a way that is different than men and boys, primarily not on the basis of a physical or biological difference, but rather on social and structural factors that influence the lives of women and girls before, during, and after a disaster. Enarson and Morrow (1998) contend that women's vulnerability to disaster is not caused by the disaster, but is produced by gendered social roles such as economic dependence, limited mobility, and reduced decision-making power, all of which are exacerbated by disasters. Bradshaw (2013) further argues that the gender gap can be exacerbated through the nature of disaster recovery efforts, an argument that is pertinent to the situation in Southern Punjab, where shelter has been provided in a non-gender-specific manner.

Gender-Based Violence in Displacement Settings

It is well documented that displacement settings, overcrowding of shelters, sanitation facilities (which are often shared and are poorly lit), and a lack of privacy are associated with increased risk of GBV (UNFPA, 2015). In conservative rural areas, families do not usually make changes to their shelters to combat this risk; instead, they limit the movement and visibility of the girls (Sultana, 2010; Jabeen, 2014). UNFPA (2015) also refers to the lack of gender-specific protection services (female staff, private consultation rooms, GBV referral pathways) as being closely associated with high risk, as girls may not have access to the services without a male family member, as they may fear stigma and/or harassment. Inadequate shelter design and the absence of protection infrastructure are also cited repeatedly as risk factors for GBV in complex emergencies, as in other, less protracted, humanitarian contexts (Stark & Ager, 2011). In this context in particular, Mumtaz and Salway (2005) show that freedom of movement is not a coincidence but a structural constraint of rural social organization which affects women's and girls' access to services not just during disaster but in everyday life, and thus must be taken into account when considering post-disaster mobility restriction.

GBV Risk and Protection Gaps in the Pakistani Context

Despite limited, but increasing, Pakistan-specific research on GBV in emergencies, there is a clear consensus that the formal protection infrastructure is generally underdeveloped in rural disaster environments. In the wake of the 2022 floods, UN Women Pakistan conducted a rapid gender analysis of the floods in Pakistan, which revealed low levels of

women's and girls' access to lighting, separation of male and female sleeping areas, and the lack of female protection staff or a complaints mechanism despite repeated calls from the humanitarian community for these. Similarly, Fida et al. (2025) observed that the gendered design of shelter has been an issue, and the emergency shelter planning in Southern Punjab has historically focused on speed and scale of shelter provision, rather than on its gendered safety design, which leaves protection needs to be managed informally by the displaced households themselves, rather than by responding institutions. Such informalization of protection, such as families taking matters into their own hands by hiring their own night-watch, limiting girls' movement, or depending on the presence of male relatives when girls go out, is consistent with the worldwide patterns behind the distribution of the responsibility for managing risk to affected communities, and to women and girls within them, in the absence of formal protection services (Fulu & Miedema, 2015; Stark & Ager, 2011). The relationship between coping and protection is relevant to displacement contexts, such as the way coping strategies are often developed to fill gaps where formal systems have failed.

Gender Norms, Mobility, and Protective Restriction

Gender norms around mobility are of particular importance in the South Asian rural context. Disaster situational awareness of everyday gender relations involves a restriction of access to public space, which is a characteristic of many rural communities, and which has complicated interactions with disaster conditions. Families may also not be able to move quickly enough to get out of the floodwaters if they have limited mobility, and during the displacement process, they often reduce girls' mobility in response to their feelings of insecurity to protect their girls, which can further limit their mobility and autonomy at a critical time when they need services and support the most (Sultana 2010). The "protective restriction" dynamic that has been documented in various contexts of disaster in South Asia, in which girls' movement is routinely curtailed and which was described specifically as a response to increased risk of harassment, and not as an arbitrary restriction, was experienced by Bangladeshi families in flood-prone communities, and was often experienced by girls as a restriction as well. (Jabeen, 2014). The involvement of adolescent girls in protective activities is particularly exposed, as they are often the ones who are expected to look after the protection of others, and are also prone to being expected to take care of themselves, adding to their vulnerability (Chandra et al., 2005; Delica-Willison and Gaillard 2012).

Early Marriage as a Form of Gender-Based Violence

Child and early marriage is a recognized type of gender-based violence, according to international human rights and public health conventions, due to a range of linked impacts including coercion, lack of bodily autonomy, and increased risk of further physical and psychological harm (WHO, 2013; UNICEF, 2014; Girls Not Brides, 2022).

Early marriage and child marriage rates have been documented to increase following disasters, as a result of economic insecurity, household instability, and families' perception of marriage as a way to protect them in displacement settings (Girls Not Brides, 2022; Save the Children, 2016; UNICEF, 2022). This practice is not necessarily seen as an oppressive one by the families: it may often be described as a "rational" or "caring" reaction to threat and economic loss, from inside the family. UNICEF Pakistan (2022) and Oxfam (2022) reported in Pakistan that early marriage was one coping mechanism adopted by families in flood-hit areas of Sindh and Southern Punjab, as it minimized the number of household dependents and ensured the safety of the daughter in the midst of uncertainty. Alam (2011) confirmed that girls in flood-affected communities in Bangladesh were far less likely to be enrolled in school post-displacement than boys, and that this was related to increased early marriage rates (this pathway seems relevant for Southern Punjab, where there is limited institutional protection against the pressure to marry during displacement, other than continued school attendance (Alam, & Collins, 2010).

Coping Mechanisms among Adolescent Girls

In addition to vulnerability, a burgeoning scholarship looks at how women and girls proactively manage and react to disaster-related insecurity by maintaining their safety and dignity through relationships, culture, and institutions when their lives are disrupted (Enarson, 2012; Masten, 2014; Drury et al., 2016). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed this basic definition of coping as "the active coping process that takes into account the social and cultural resources made available to the individual and is shaped throughout by that process. This initial definition of coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984): Coping is the active coping process that is shaped throughout by the social and cultural resources made available to the individual, meaning taking into account social support seeking, religious coping, routine maintenance, and meaning-making is all part of coping. Female family members and peers are consistently reported as a key coping mechanism for adolescent girls across South and Southeast Asian humanitarian settings (Save the Children, 2016; UNICEF, 2022), and across Muslim communities affected by disaster, faith-based coping is reported as a central and culturally embedded coping resource, including through prayer, Quranic recitation, and the belief that there is a divine purpose in suffering (Ager & Strang, 2008; Cannon, 2008; Jabeen, 2014). Masten (2014) refers to what she calls "ordinary magic"—when disaster triggers ordinary human adaptive systems, and not extraordinary individual qualities, to foster resilience. Ungar (2012) conceptualizes resilience relationally, as a function of the capacity of the individual within the context of available institutional and community resources, highlighting that girls' coping skills, important as they are, are not a replacement for structural protection, which is also needed, especially when considering informal, self-organized coping strategies engaged in by women in displacement in South Asian camp contexts (Fulu & Miedema, 2015; Norris et al., 2008).

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on three complementary frameworks: Feminist disaster theory (Enarson & Morrow, 1998) challenges the idea that disaster impacts upon populations equally, and focuses on the importance of gender in disaster violence, protection and recovery, and the impact of existing constraints on the mobility and decision-making of girls and women in disaster risk reduction. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) takes this lens further by considering how gender interacts with other socio-demographic characteristics such as age, marital status, and household composition to create different experiences of safety and risk in the same disaster event; for example, that a girl who is not in a male-headed household has a different risk profile than a girl who is in a male-headed household, and that the pressure of marriage affects a girl differently from an unmarried girl. The social vulnerability framework (Cutter et al., 2003; Wisner et al., 2004) places these experiences in the material and institutional conditions that shape that pays the highest price for safety as a result of displacement: shelter design, protection infrastructure, and access to services. These frameworks combine to conceptualize flood displacement not only as a physical displacement, but as a gendered, age-specific safety crisis; and they are sensitive to girls' agency and coping capacities, rather than as simple victims.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study used a qualitative exploratory design with an interpretivist philosophy, as it believes that humans make sense of what is happening within the event via their personal experience and social environment (Bryman, 2016). This method was appropriate for the subject of capturing the subjective experience of safety, security, and coping as participants subjectively experienced and narrated it, rather than just standardizing these experiences into measurements (Creswell et al., 2018).

Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in Dajal, a flood-prone area of Rajanpur district in Southern Punjab, which is most often subject to floods leading to displacement and also has a weak protection system (NDMA, 2022). The sample consisted of 18 late adolescent girls who were aged 18–21 years, experienced displacement as a result of the floods in 2022 and/or 2023, and were recruited using purposive sampling combined with snowball referral by contacts in the community. Guest et al. (2006) and Patton (2015) indicate that the sample size was selected for thematic saturation and not selected in accordance with a statistical criterion. This approach led to a conclusion that data saturation was reached after the 18th

interview, with the transcriptions after this point more likely to reiterate codes and themes of the data and not highlight any new patterns that were relevant to the research questions being investigated, and so recruitment was ended at this point. The sampling was purposeful and included married and unmarried women and girls and engaged women, girls living with a widowed parent, girls living without a female head of household, and girls living in school-based camps, open spaces, and with relative's/host families, since the safety experiences and family responses to insecurity varied significantly across the groups. Table 1 shows the socio-demographic and displacement situation of the eighteen participants.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic and Displacement Profile of Participants (N = 18)

Code	Age	Education	Marital Status	Household Composition	Flood(s) Experienced
P01	19	Matriculation incomplete	Unmarried	Lives with parents and four siblings	2022
P02	21	FA completed	Engaged	Lives with parents and two brothers	2022
P03	18	Class 8, dropped out	Unmarried	Lives with widowed mother and three siblings	2023
P04	20	BA first year, suspended	Unmarried	Lives with parents and one sister	2022
P05	19	Matric completed	Unmarried	Lives with parents, two brothers, grandmother	2022
P06	21	Matric completed	Recently married (post-flood)	Lives with husband's family	2022
P07	18	Class 10, disrupted	Unmarried	Lives with parents and five siblings	2023
P08	20	FA completed	Unmarried	Lives with widowed father and two brothers	2022
P09	19	Matric completed	Unmarried	Lives with parents, two sisters, and one brother	2022 and 2023
P10	21	BA second year	Unmarried	Lives with parents and grandmother	2022

Code	Age	Education	Marital Status	Household Composition	Flood(s) Experienced
P11	18	Class 9, dropped out	Unmarried	Lives with parents, three brothers, one sister	2023
P12	20	Matric completed	Unmarried	Lives with parents, one brother, two sisters	2022
P13	21	FA completed	Married (one year)	Lives with husband and in-laws	2022
P14	18	Class 8, disrupted	Unmarried	Lives with parents, four siblings; father works seasonally	2023
P15	19	Matric completed	Unmarried	Lives with parents and one brother	2022
P16	20	FA first year, incomplete	Unmarried	Lives with parents, three brothers, maternal grandmother	2022 and 2023
P17	21	BA completed	Unmarried	Lives with parents and two younger sisters	2022
P18	19	Class 9, irregular	Unmarried	Lives with parents, grandmother, four siblings	2023

Table 1 provides details of the education level and marital status of respondents, which range from those who had dropped out of school early to those who were currently pursuing an undergraduate degree, and from unmarried to engaged, recently married, and married participants. Household composition also differed, with some participants having a widowed parent, and displacement was associated with flooding in 2022 or 2023, or both in cases of repeated displacement. This diversity was not an accidental sampling effect, but was intentional because it provided the opportunity for the analysis to compare safety risk and coping across different household and marital situations, which is explored in Section 5.4.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

A gatekeeper, the Assistant Education Officer of the study area, was introduced to access families and was known to the communities that suffered from the flood in Dajal. The gatekeeper arranged the interviews, introduced the researcher to the families and other prospective participants, and helped schedule the timing and location of the interviews to ensure participants' safety and comfort. The gate keeping function was crucial in the process of gaining initial legitimacy and trust in this conservative rural context, especially with respect to the sensitive issues that were explored.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in Urdu, Punjabi, or Saraiki as per participants' preference regarding the themes of displacement experience, perceptions of safety, risk of gender-based violence, pressure on marriage, and coping mechanisms. Interviews were conducted in a confidential setting to promote sensitive issues. All participants gave informed consent and were advised that they had the option to omit any question and could withdraw at any time. Throughout, a trauma-sensitive approach was taken, with interviews being stopped and/or slowed when any participant indicated distress. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were fully respected: their names are not mentioned in the study, and all the statements have been referred to only by the anonymous participant codes (P01-P18).

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis approach, which included repeated readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity, open coding for significant statements, and grouping codes into broader themes for further review and refinement in light of the research questions. Themes were rechecked with the entire set of transcripts to ensure they were indeed repeated, and then atypical and disconfirming accounts were coded and kept in order to avoid giving the impression of a uniform sample. Analysis was based on the participants' own words and not imposed categories.

Trust Worthiness and Rigour

Steps were taken to enhance the believability and reliability of the analysis. Transcripts were read several times prior to coding, with initial impressions cross-checked with a more detailed and contextualized reading of each transcript. The emerging themes were checked against the full sample of eighteen transcripts, not a small sample of particularly rich interviews, to ensure that the patterns found, especially the re-emerging themes of 'protective mobility restriction' and "marriage pressure," were not merely representing a minority of the interviews. In the presentation of findings, direct quotations were used whenever possible to ensure that the fit and congruence between what the participant describes and the interpretation offered to the reader is maintained, as is typical in establishing credibility in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). In each of the 18 interviews, the trauma-sensitive interview protocol (including pausing, skipping, and ending an interview at any time) was used, supporting the reliability of disclosure for sensitive issues including harassment, restricted mobility, and marriage pressure that participants may have been less inclined to disclose completely.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher, who has been trained in gender studies and who is not part of the Dajal community, knew that this research involved young rural women, and that research interviews can have power dynamics. Initial trust was established with local community contacts, introductions were made, and interviews were carried out in the participants' preferred language to minimize communication barriers. This positionality was recognized as a drawback because there was not always the possibility that participants could be fluent in the culture and have a pre-existing sense of trust; and as a strength because the participants felt that they would be more likely to talk about sensitive matters around safety with a person not from their existing social network, who would not be involved in the continuing relationship within the family or community after the research was finished.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis yielded three interconnected patterns which are detailed below and linked to the literature: Insecurity and restricted mobility as a GBV risk-management strategy; Marriage pressure as a GBV; Coping through family, faith and routine. When read together, these patterns indicate that while safety risk, protective control, and marriage pressure in this sample were not distinct issues, but rather aspects of a single continuum, most likely a dynamic that was taken up by families in which the pressure to protect was not taken up by the formal disaster response, with girls' own autonomy and life choices being compromised in part for the sake of family protection. These themes are summarized with illustrative data in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Themes, Key Patterns, and Illustrative Data

Theme	Key Pattern	Illustrative Data
1. Insecurity, Restricted Mobility, and GBV Risk	Fear of harassment in crowded, poorly lit, mixed-sex shelters; families respond with informal male guarding and restriction of girls' movement rather than reliance on formal protection.	"Like we were prisoners of our own security"; informal night-watch organized by women after a male intruder entered a sleeping area.
2. Marriage Pressure as a Form of GBV	Displacement-driven economic and safety anxiety accelerates family pressure toward early marriage, framed as protection rather than coercion, often coinciding with disrupted education.	"At least one daughter will be settled and taken care of" (father's rationale, married six months post-flood); "My education was not as important as settling and having a family."

Theme	Key Pattern	Illustrative Data
3. Coping Through Family, Faith, and Routine	Girls draw on maternal support, prayer and Quranic recitation, peer confiding, journaling, and informal collective safety strategies to manage insecurity in the absence of formal services.	Reciting the Quran described as a source of peace; informal night-watch among women; journaling to process feelings without burdening family.

Insecurity, Restricted Mobility, and GBV Risk

While only a few participants reported direct violence, most noted ongoing threats of harassment related to the conditions of crowded shelters, inadequate lighting, and multiple people sleeping in the same shelter, and the presence of men who were not familiar to them. One participant changed her habits upon being approached in an inappropriate manner near the shared bathroom and no longer went out alone. One woman said her father told her to never use the toilet at night by herself so that she would go in the morning instead, thus forcing her to choose between discomfort and potential danger. In some homes, male relatives rotated shifts in the sleeping areas at the front of tents; according to one participant, her brothers did not view the camp as a safe place to sleep at night, indicating that families were also aware of the lack of proper shelter protection. One participant who had taken shelter in an open area without toilets said she felt 'undignified and unsafe,' and another one recounted a disturbing experience when a man entered the sleeping area for the women, only for the women in his camp to set up their own informal night guard, highlighting the precarious nature of institutional protection and the responsibility placed on women to ensure their own safety. The results align with UNFPA's (2015) observation that poor gender-specific infrastructure and services are closely associated with the increased risk of GBV in humanitarian settings and with other emergency reviews (Stark & Ager, 2011) that identified lack of adequate shelter design as a common risk factor across emergency contexts.

One of the most common reactions to such dangers was for families to limit the movement of girls, which participants acknowledged as a two-way street. One participant, whose father and brothers forbade her from venturing anywhere, including to the toilet at night, said it made her feel like "we were prisoners of our own security," a phrase which encapsulates the protective motivation and the restricting impact of this prohibition. One said she was told not to leave the tent area unless with a male member of the family; she knew that this was the rule, but it made her feel frustrated and dependent. A third interviewee recalled she was told never to go anywhere without her siblings, never to look a stranger in the eye, revealing that fear was not only specific to certain situations, but was generalized into a constant social caution that influenced her bodily conduct day in and day out. The protection through restriction relationship did not happen because of displacement, but because it was discovered and strengthened by the

displacement itself, echoing the findings of Sultana (2010), Jabeen (2014), and Mumtaz and Salway (2005) that restrictions to mobility, especially when presented as a form of protection, can limit the autonomy and access to services of girls.

Some of the girls' stories also indicate that people made choices because they did not want to be harassed, and this decision, although not explicitly labeled as a safety choice, was nonetheless used as a means of reducing the visibility and independent activity of girls. One participant reported that her family had thought it would be better for her to have someone else bring the water and the relief supplies for her, which was temporarily taken over by a younger male cousin, without them discussing why. Another commented that her family started calling all male strangers in the camp "trouble to be avoided," which was an indicator that the responsibility of risk management was shifting from the shelter to her as an individual, by the family, and not from the shelter itself. These narratives show how, in practice, responsibility for avoiding harm was placed on individual girls' behavior; they reduced their presence and were expected to take care of themselves, rather than expecting the physical or institutional environment to change (conforming to wider evidence that in low-resource displacement contexts, informal risk management at the household level is a substitute for, not a supplement to, formal protection provision, UN Women Pakistan, 2022; Fulu & Miedema, 2015).

Marriage Pressure as a Form of Gender-Based Violence

One significant observation was the increased rates and/or severity of displacement leading to increased pressures for early marriage, which was similar to that found by UNICEF Pakistan (2022) and Oxfam (2022) in flood-affected areas of Sindh and Southern Punjab. In this case, a participant married six months after the flood, stating that her father felt that "at least one daughter will be married and taken care of", even though she herself was not feeling ready; this example echoes international frameworks which consider pressured marriage as a form of gender-based violence, not a natural family decision, which is what can be seen when disaster shortens life timelines (WHO, 2013; Girls Not Brides, 2022). Other participants reported that they heard their family members talking about how it would be better for a daughter to be settled into a man's house than to live in another man's house and that the comment by her aunt had scared her. A third participant spoke of how a neighbor's comment about them marrying her off, because of their losses, caused anxiety for her and her mother when no marriage ever actually occurred, highlighting the social impacts of the disaster on marriage pressures and, as such, generating real anxiety without a marriage occurring. A second participant's account further revealed how the anxiety for girls in the camp unfolded into the anxiety for girls to marry: fears for girls' safety in the camp linked directly to fears regarding girls' marriage, for some families, meaning that fears for girls' safety and fears for girls' marital future constituted the same.

Often, this pressure was followed by school disruption, in line with Alam's (2011) evidence that there is a strong correlation between school disruption and increased early marriage rates among girls. One person, who was still in school, said that after the flood, her "education was not as important as settling and having a family," and her cousin's marriage, explained during displacement as settling a person, was a hasty marriage, with her education and plans for the future treated as less of a priority. A second respondent, who had only just finished her undergraduate course, said it was "very painful to lose it [because] I worked really hard to get into college" and continued to worry that she might not finish her matriculation. The accounts indicate that displacement can shorten girls' decision-making time, reduce or not increase their life options at a time of vulnerability; and that marriage was often presented as a "caring and protective" response for families' losses, not as a form of violence, even if the loss was not intended.

One participant was very clear about the structural dimension of this pressure, noting that girls in the displacement were expected to make major life decisions such as marriage at an uncommon rate and that someone should look after their right to time before they make such decisions. Her story is told in terms of the pressure for marriage, which is not only the choice of the individual family, but a climate of fear and insecurity, and a prevailing social norm that girls' safety lies in marriage to another family. This brings a feminist approach to disaster scholarship to bear, which argues that fear and uncertainty can strengthen, not question, gender norms that claim marriage is a protective measure and a source of social security for girls in conservative contexts, and that disaster may reinforce conservative gender norms rather than challenge them (Enarson, 2012; Sultana, 2010). Repeated flooding in the same year was also explicitly linked to a generalized erosion of hope by several participants; one who had been exposed to experiencing flooding several times across successive years said that a flood cost a family more than its material belongings and that the flooding also cost a family a degree of faith in the stability of life itself, a comment that seemed to suggest there might be a progressive narrowing of the range of possible futures as well as the range of immediate choices available to girls within the context of repeated exposure to flooding.

Coping Through Family, Faith, and Everyday Routine

Despite the difficulties, participants were found to be very resourceful in their coping with insecurity and with limited autonomy. The most common coping factors mentioned were family support, with several participants noting that their mothers were a significant source of emotional stability and practical assistance with their safety needs, consistent with the findings of other studies of relational coping among displaced adolescent girls (Save the Children, 2016; UNICEF, 2022). One participant described her mother as always being there for her and how prayer helped her to stay emotionally stable; another

participant described her mother as a source of her stability because her mother was sick and she had to be strong for her, an example of how family coping worked both ways, with girls being cared for by their mothers and the mothers being cared for by their daughters. Faith-related coping, especially prayer and recitation of the Quran, was the most frequently reported coping strategy, consistent with Ager and Strang (2008), Cannon (2008), and Jabeen (2014), who found that religious practice was used for coping among Muslim communities in disaster settings of South Asia. Religious consolation and household duty were not two separate responsibilities but one, one participant said, describing reciting the Quran as a source of peace and caring for her younger siblings as a source of purpose, which enabled her to get through the crisis.

Other interventions involved other women in shelters discussing safety issues, maintaining small daily routines, journaling, and/or arranging for the women to share responsibilities for night-watching, echoing Masten's (2014) notion of "ordinary magic": small, everyday efforts to provide the security and some level of protection that would otherwise go missing in these institutions. One of those present kept a diary throughout the displacement period just to work through her emotions without adding another burden on her family; another one maintained her own study schedule after being moved into a family member's house, which she called a "little act of continuity": holding on to a sense of self in the face of disruption. In particular, two participants cited conversation with other women as a coping mechanism that helped them to deal with fear, one of whom talked about a calm and wise older woman, and another who spoke about sharing stories within her camp; both of these situations were in somewhat more permanent and intimate environments where a woman's kindness, a female presence, and a shared experience of conversation provided emotional relief not offered by formal services.

These coping strategies are not passive, but rather meaningful, with an emphasis on agency. However, as described in Ungar's (2012) relational conceptualization of resilience, they should not be glamorized as a sign that there was something adequate, but rather that girls and their families had to use their own resources, of which personal, relational, and informal collective resources were the most important, to make up for the lack of formal protection and psychosocial support in displacement. The findings on informalization of safety provision in under-resourced humanitarian contexts in general (Fulu & Miedema, 2015) matched displacement strategies observed in this analysis, which were overwhelmingly informal and privatized at the household and peer level rather than formal humanitarian or governmental protection measures.

Unequal Vulnerability across the Sample

Within this relatively small and geographically dense sample, there were no uniform safety conditions or coping capacity. Camp and open space girls reported the greatest

safety concerns, and camp girls reported significantly less physical safety in their relatives' home, but with some increased mobility, they still commented on the anxiety felt in relation to marriage. Whether a mother or adult female was present or not did seem to affect both practical safety support and girls' sense of protection; girls who did not have a mother present felt more exposed and more reliant on the informal protection arrangements of family members who were men. Experience further differentiated in terms of marital status, with unmarried participants talking more about fear, limited mobility, and marriage pressure as an experience to them; while an engaged or newly married participant talked more about family honor and the hurriedness of major life decisions. The size of the household and the number of adult male family members living in the house also seemed to be significant: those in smaller households, or those in which male relatives were also displaced or had to go away to work, experienced a more extreme sense of exposure and less indirect protection than those in larger extended families who were better able to organize the informal protection arrangements, even if imperfect. The patterns are illustrative of the continuum of vulnerability to GBV and safety risk, directly reflecting that no single factor gender, age, and displacement determines the intensity of girls' safety experience (Crenshaw, 1991; Cutter et al., 2003).

Discussion

These findings, grouped into three interrelated themes, go beyond just describing the displacement situation and help explain the way in which structural neglect at the humanitarian level is absorbed, lives with, and is eventually re-created at the household level. This section goes beyond the presentation of patterns seen in Section 5 to discuss the implications of these patterns for the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, and for the wider literature on gender-based violence (GBV) in disaster contexts.

Reinterpreting Protective Restriction as a Structural Substitute

There was a high level of informal, family-imposed mobility restriction as a result of insecurity in the shelters, which reinforces the main tenet of feminist disaster theory, namely that vulnerability is not a natural attribute of the hazard itself but is created by social structures (Enarson & Morrow, 1998). In this sample, it is not only that restriction happened; it was used to replace, not complement, formal protection infrastructure. This is similar to what Bradshaw (2013) argues; in such situations, recovery processes do not address gender issues, but rather perpetuate inequalities, as it is the family's responsibility to keep people safe at a time when institutional capacity is required. The finding also extends Sultana (2010) and Jabeen (2014), who documented protective restriction in flood-affected Bangladesh: in the Dajal context, restriction was explicitly linked by participants with specific infrastructural failures, such as shared sanitation facilities

which are poorly lit, and mixed-sex sleeping arrangements, in line with accounts of shelter design failure documented by UNFPA (2015) and Stark and Ager (2011) that increase GBV risk in humanitarian settings. When read together, these comparisons suggest that protective restriction should not be interpreted as a fixed cultural preference, but as a rational (if expensive) adaptation by the household to a lack of institutional protection – in line with the overall reasoning of Mumtaz and Salway (2005) that in rural Pakistan, restricting women's and girls' mobility is not incidental to their culture, but instead a structural feature.

Early Marriage as Contested Protection

The relationship between displacement and increased pressure for early marriage is consistent with many other studies that have found that disasters can hasten marriage decisions perceived as a protective measure (UNICEF Pakistan, 2022; Oxfam, 2022; Girls Not Brides, 2022). What this study adds is that participants did not talk about marriage pressure as a directive, but rather as a "climate of anxiety" that was generated from overheard conversations, extended family's comments, and anticipated stigma, which influenced decisions, whether one took place or not. This mirrors the logic behind early marriage being a type of GBV, which suggests that coercion doesn't have to be direct to limit a girl's autonomy in choices she makes about her body and future (WHO, 2013). This disruption of schooling that was often linked to or followed marriage pressure in this sample also aligns with Alam's (2011) results from Bangladesh, which found a connection between disrupted schooling, the interruption of continuous schooling, and the increase in marriage rates, highlighting the fact that the interruption of educational pathways may be one of the more manageable policy tools that disaster response can use to impact this trend. Families in this study also did not talk about marriage as an opportunistic choice; instead, it was frequently described as a caring response to loss, in keeping with Enarson (2012), who found that disaster contexts can serve to reinforce rather than challenge conservative gender norms as fear offers a language for decisions that limit girls' futures.

Coping as Compensation, Not Substitution, for Formal Protection

A central theme of family support, faith practice, and small routines as coping resources underscores Masten's (2014) idea of "ordinary magic," where resilience is found not in extraordinary people, but in daily adaptive systems. Prayer and recitation of the Quran emerged as an important coping strategy, consistent with previous research on disaster-affected Muslim communities (Ager & Strang, 2008; Cannon, 2008), while mothers, sisters, and peer networks were highlighted as important coping mechanisms, echoing the findings of previous research with displaced adolescent girls in other parts of South Asia (Save the Children, 2016; UNICEF, 2022). But to view these results as a demonstration

of resilience alone would be to oversell the capacity of informal coping. In keeping with Ungar (2012), coping capacity can only be understood in relation to the institutional resources available to support it, and in this sample, girls' resourcefulness was manifested most clearly in the context of the denial of formal protection/compensation, rather than sufficiency. This is supported by the findings of Fulu and Miedema (2015), who note, "the informal strategies of safety at the household level typically emerge as a direct reaction to the lack of institutional protection, rather than as a deliberate coping response.

Integrating the Themes: A Continuum of Gendered Risk

The three themes are best discussed as one and as expressions of the same underlying dynamic, as they are both identified from an intersectional and social vulnerability lens for this study. The differences in experiences and responses to insecurity found in the sample can be explained by the framework developed by Crenshaw (1991), which suggests that multiple factors would predate the disaster and drive differential experiences and responses to insecurity. The social vulnerability model proposed by Cutter et al. (2003) also predicted that preexisting social and institutional conditions would shape the differential risk found in the sample, as opposed to the hazard event. Through this holistic perspective, restricted mobility, marriage pressures, and informal coping are not three separate events, but are rather successive coping strategies to the same structural gap: the lack of gender responsive protection in the disaster response system in Southern Punjab. This interpretation builds on Wisner et al.'s (2004) initial finding that vulnerability is created well in advance of any hazard being encountered, and demonstrates in a tangible way how vulnerability is re-negotiated at each displacement phase, and sometimes even strengthened. It also indicates that attempts to address just one theme (for example, addressing girls' exposure to shelter lighting without considering the pressures of marriage) are not likely to significantly reduce overall exposure to risk because the three themes are not independent problems, but rather a system that reinforces each other.

Conclusion

This study illustrates how compounding sets of safety risks for late adolescent girls are created by gender, age, and rural marginalization as a result of displacement caused by floods in Dajal, Rajanpur. These factors, when combined with insecurity of shelter, early marriage, and limited mobility due to the protection mandate, represent a unique pattern of gender-based violence risk that has not been adequately captured in disaster analysis at the household/community level conducted in Pakistan. Concurrently, the sense of agency among participants in the face of severe constraints, in using family support, religion, and informal collective safety mechanisms, suggests that while disaster protection is largely missing, some protection exists. The results highlight the fact that prevention of gender-

based violence is not a "side issue" to providing food, water, and shelter; addressing adolescent girls' safety, privacy, and freedom from forced marriage is a central pillar of humanitarian action.

Combining these three patterns of insecurity from the study, it is concluded that the safety of late adolescent girls is being taken as a private responsibility at the household level, while the responsibility is public at the institutional level regarding the disaster response in the present disaster response system in Southern Punjab. Changing this status quo, where gender-based violence is treated as a risk and resource like food, water and shelter, will be a small step but an impactful one in the way Pakistan's flood response deals with one of the least visible and least talked about risks.

Recommendations

In view of the findings and in keeping with the major themes of the study, three specific recommendations have been made to the policymakers, disaster management institutions and humanitarian agencies in the districts of Southern Punjab that are prone to floods:

- Requires gender responsive shelter design – measurable, for example, physically segregated sleeping areas and adequate lighting, to ensure girls' safety, not by restricting their mobility within the family.
- Incorporate GBV protection services, such as female protection officers and confidential referral pathways, into prevention activities and relief responses from the beginning of the camp to fill the gap between informal (household) safety measures observed during this study and formal GBV protection services that are currently lacking.
- Improve community-level awareness and economic support measures that include direct involvement of fathers and male guardians to overcome the security and financial concerns that can lead to early marriage among adolescent girls, thereby lessening displacement pressures for adolescent girls to marry before they are ready.

The question is not if, but how, risks can be faced by the adolescent girls again in Southern Punjab in Pakistan; and whether the disaster response system could be refashioned to put protecting adolescent girls as a structural priority, rather than an afterthought.

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