



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Confronting Challenges: Coping and Motivational Strategies through Lived Experiences of Women from Pakistani Diaspora in Canada**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present research analyses the lived experiences of women from Pakistani diaspora in Canada to examine gender-based marginalization and coping and motivational strategies implemented by women. A qualitative research methodology was put to use as phenomenological approach investigated the experiences of women in their everyday lives. Participants were selected from the most densely populated Pakistani neighbourhoods across Canada and eight in-depth interviews with a semi-structured pattern were conducted with the participants. Participants selected were all born and raised in Pakistan and had moved to Canada at least five years ago. All participants either held a university degree or were enrolled in a university degree program. Based on participant responses, thematic analysis was conducted and eight associated categories emerged: Proactive approach, family and peer support, complying, financial independence, professional help, expression and communication, taking a stand and risking beyond social expectations. The findings of the research study are aligned with the series of previous research studies conducted using the same data set and these studies are at an intersection of gender, migration, and racialization. The studies highlight that women are making intentional and conscious efforts to challenge the deep-rooted and culturally supported ideas of patriarchy and familial structures. There is a need to involve policy-makers to create enabling and responsive policies along with equally enabling support systems that recognize the unique demands of women's experiences due to their cultural backgrounds and promote inclusivity, empowerment and mental well-being.

**KEYWORDS** Pakistani Diaspora, South Asian Women, Female Migration, Gender-Based Marginalization, Coping Strategies, Mental Health

**Introduction**

Women from South Asia suffer from acculturative stress due to a clash of majority and minority cultures which causes emotional stress, loneliness, intergenerational conflict and gap along with adjusting into settler society (Samuel, 2009). But due to the global rise of female migration in recent times and due to awareness of rights and potential opportunities, women have been actively involved in their economic independence along with fulfilling the cultural roles and expectations in their households (Adam, 2023).

Women often utilize dual coping mechanisms in dissatisfied marriages to overcome emotional loneliness (Nawaz & Ferdoos, 2025; Muzaffar, et al., 2018). Another study on victims of intimate partner violence revealed that women adopted interpersonal coping strategies such as fighting back and/or intra personal strategies remaining silent, seeking emotional support from trusted friends and family, diverting attention towards prayer and religious healing and in extreme cases, stepped up to leave the relationship (Baffour et al., 2022). A similar study on women in leadership in Pakistani academia highlighted that women struggle in their career due to male-dominated organizational structures, stereotypes and constant juggling with familial pressures and managing households which pushes them to develop personalized coping mechanisms (Ali & Rasheed, 2021). In order to

continuously adapt to changing environment and challenging expectations around them, Nepali women facing marginalization challenges in leadership roles revealed that the coping strategies they enact upon to overcome gender inequality include work-life balance, self-distraction, personalized tactics to regulate their emotions by focusing on strengths more than the weaknesses (Khanal et al., 2026). For married women, the coping mechanism for stress heavily relies on joint-family pressures, indirect religiously referenced messaging in social and family gatherings and the influence of religious leaders in their daily lives (Nawaz & Ferdoos, 2025).

In South Asia, the colonial divide and years of historic hostility has been interrupted by cross-border feminist activism that addresses the challenges of gender marginalization through collective friendly feminist strategies (Kanagasbai et al., 2023). Similarly, there is a need to reform and bring policy changes that help in coping social stressors and identity threats for South Asian immigrant women by developing more inclusive, adaptive and culturally aligned coping strategies for their health and mental well-being (Jaspan, Lupis & Ferozali, 2025).

## **Literature Review**

### **Feminist Activism and South Asia**

Over the years, South Asia has witnessed impressive activism to achieve gender equality with a primary focus on health and mental well-being of women (Cader & Khanna, 2024). Moreover, in America, Asian American feminist activism highlights the systemic inequalities and proposes Asian Feminist Critical Race framework with activism for bringing justice and solidarity for issues like domestic violence, workplace discrimination, sex trafficking and the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee women (Tsong, Kim & Yokoyama, 2024). Across South Asia and within South Asian cultures, activists have been quite successful in creating awareness about gender equality through community engagement locally at national levels but now it needs more involvement to penetrate multiple levels of social spheres that govern the behaviors of people in respective societies (Cader & Khanna, 2024). The concept of friendly feminist activism across borders has helped in understanding and reorganizing the patterns of existing hierarchies and critique the centuries old heteropatriarchal influence on women in South Asia (Kanagasbai et al., 2023).

### **Familial Expectations and Migration Challenges**

The South Asian community in America is generally popular due to its reputation of a model minority that has achieved financial success, sustainability and educational growth over the years (Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996). In order to keep up with their cultural responsibilities, South Asian women actively participate in their cultural preservation activities and use it as a mechanism for coping challenges that they face in a new country and within their households (Udayanga, 2024). Despite successful migration to America, South Asian women are expected to strictly keep up with their culture, pass it down to their children and never let their family's honor get compromised due to which they remain silent on their domestic challenges and abuse along with immigrational challenges in a completely different society (Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996).

### **Social Support, Informal Network and South Asian Women**

A study on a sample of women in South India reported that women are not open to professional mental health services due to strong stigma and a perception that these services are not appropriate to address their personal mental issues (Weaver et al., 2024). A study on Canadian immigrant South Asian women reported that due to the lack of understanding of ethnic and cultural differences with professional health providers in

Canada, the women do not trust the professional counselors available around them since they feel their values and background do not align for proper understanding of their mental and emotional issues (Samuel, 2009). A study on Nepali women living in Nepal reported that they develop culturally grounded coping strategies for example, spiritual fortification to keep up with everyday challenges they face by confronting the deep-rooted cultural barriers and acknowledging the negative impact it brings for the women (Khanal et al., 2026).

Similarly, women in South India reported to secretly go to Mahila Sanghas (local women organizations) if they feel too troubled and want support and guidance as per cultural norms and traditions (Weaver et al., 2024). Many women reported that they do not want to seek professional help as they will be labelled mad and their mothers and elderly women in the family have told them to endure the domestic stressors because it will make them stronger in life and they can overcome it eventually if they are strong. (Weaver et al., 2024).

### **Immigrant Women and Coping Strategies**

Different researches show different strategies which different groups of immigrants imply to cope with domestic abuse and mental health issues (Bhandari, 2017). Although South Asian women tend to have similar coping strategies with other immigrant groups, there are still some striking cultural traits that are visible in their choice of coping and motivational strategies (Bhandari, 2017). Since, in most South Asian families, a daughter is considered a part of her husband's family after marriage, women become hesitant to talk to their natal familial relations and there is hesitation from her birth family to intervene in her married life too (Yoshioka & Dang, 2000). South Asian women mostly rely on informal support which mainly comes from talking to their immediate family members, close friends and neighbours in some cases (Bhandari, 2017). In a study on elderly Indian women who migrated to Canada, participants reported that as a coping mechanism they consciously choose interdependence of family for social and emotional support as they experience a huge shift in traditional values and social support due to migration (Choudhry, 2001). A study on acculturative stress on immigrant women in Canada highlighted that all participants reported no association with any professional counsellor rather, confided in friends and family for support as an emotion-coping mechanism (Samuel, 2009). A study of British South Asian women reported that concealment of emotions and true feelings to honor culture is the most popular coping mechanism used by South Asian women (Jaspan, Lupis & Ferozali, 2025).

### **Women, Religion and Migration**

Religion is an anchor that provides a sense of self and resilience to migrating women (Adam, 2023). According to a recent study on Muslim women in Central Asia, due to a significant impact of religion shaping traditional gender roles, religious leaders and their teaching play an important role in implementing efforts to deal with gender play and strategies to overcome it (Toktarbekova et al., 2025). Investigative research studies show that religion acts as a grounding force for women and provides roots for maintaining their identity and be resilient in their existence (Adam, 2023). But in many cases, religion acts as a dual coping mechanism since it brings negative coping mechanism through varied interpretations of patience, resilience and gendered roles and positive coping mechanism through the power of prayer, emotional control and hopefulness (Nawaz & Ferdoos, 2025). Victims of intimate partner violence reported to seek solace through prayer and hopefulness as a coping mechanism to sustain and overcome domestic abuse (Baffour, 2022).

### **Reconceptualizing Policies for South Asian Immigrant Women**

As per participant responses and changing times, there is a need to reconceptualize the old concepts of help for domestic abuse for the survivors and use the network-oriented

approach to create informal networks through smaller groups between professionals and survivors (Goodman & Smyth, 2011). South Asian immigrant women need more integration in Canadian society therefore, policymakers and practitioners need to develop unique programs policies that focus on their cultural values and at the same time promote gender equality and security for them in their homes, workplaces and social environments (Udayanga, 2024). A similar study on efforts to address gender inequality implemented by women activists to approach such issues successfully stated that through the social media influence and mobilizing the participation of women during different cultural and religious gatherings can help promote more inclusivity and empowerment in decision-making in their public and personal life (Toktarbekova et al., 2025). As for elderly women who migrate at a later age in life with family, there is a need for healthcare providers to consider the stress factors like change in traditional environment, social and emotional stress due to unfamiliar surroundings and using interdependence strategies to rely on family members to seek emotional security (Choudhry, 2001).

### **Material and Methods**

For the present study, qualitative research methodology has been used by implementing phenomenological research methodology. This method of research was best suited for this study because it investigated the lived experiences of women through their opinions and perceptions in Pakistani diaspora in Canada. In phenomenological research method, experiences of an individual are analyzed in terms of a specific phenomenon in relation to their personal feelings towards it (Guest et al., 2012).

This research study is a part of a series of research studies conducted on women belonging to Pakistani diaspora in Canada. Therefore, the same methodology is followed for all sections of this research using the same data set.

### **Participants**

A sample of eight Pakistani women from Pakistani diaspora living in the urban centers across Canada was selected. All the participants were recruited to multiple community engagement activities across Canada in the most densely populated Pakistani community neighbourhoods. The community engagement activities were conducted in Greater Toronto Area, Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal and Ottawa. All the participants recruited were aged between 18 to 45 years who had either completed a university degree program or were currently enrolled in a university degree program. The participants selected were all born and raised in Pakistan and had moved to Canada at least five or more years ago. The duration of data collection was 12-month and was carried out by a single researcher. Prior to this research, a pilot study was also conducted to investigate whether the gender-based challenges stated by Boyd and Grieco (2003) are presently relevant for highly educated Pakistani women living in Canada or the situation as changed over the years in terms of social exposure, autonomy, gender equity and other social and familial contexts.

After analyzing the patterns stated by Creswall (2014), the sample size was deliberately kept small due to the sensitivity and nature of the research topic and to ensure optimal quality of the responses recorded and investigated. Therefore, 8 participants were recruited for interviews for this study. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, pseudonyms were assigned to all eight participants and they were consistently used throughout the research and the research interviews to keep up with participant anonymity and confidentiality (Guest et al., 2012). Snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants during community engagement activities across Pakistani communities in Canada.

The eligibility criteria for this research was purposely focused on women born and raised in urban centers of Pakistan and holding a university degree because these women

are believed to be exposed to better educational and professional opportunities as compared to other women residing in smaller towns or villages of Pakistan. A university degree is part of tertiary education and in Pakistan, a limited number of women are exposed to university-level education which allows them to have better understanding and knowledge about their society, culture and the world.

### **Procedure**

This research study was approved by university's Research Ethics Board. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all eight participants using a secure videoconferencing platform provided by the university. Each participant was interviewed individually. Ethical consideration as stated by the Research Ethics Board of the university were strictly followed. All interviews were flexible and conducted based on the time, availability and convenience of the participants. Each participant selected their own time and date and they were given the freedom to reschedule it if needed. As per selection and ethical criteria, all participants signed a formal consent form and they were comprehensively briefed about the nature of the research study, assuring complete participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research. Participants were also informed that all interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed for research purposes. Before, the beginning of the interviews, each participant was again debriefed about consent, participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research. Each participant was compensated with a gift card of a Canadian grocery store and a coffee shop as a goodwill gesture for research participation.

As per the nature of the research, participants were given the flexibility to take breaks at any point during the interviews, skip questions, not answer questions they feel uncomfortable about and/or exit the interview altogether if they felt uncomfortable. A pre-determined set of questions which was designed through interaction during pilot studies was asked from all the participants. For the interview questions, envelope structure was put to use where the interview began with general questions leading to more in-depth, specific and sensitive questions and then transitioning back to general questions at the end. The set of interview questions was divided into four categories: general introductory questions related to gender-based marginalization in South Asian communities, in-depth and more focused questions on experiences from personal life, questions about gender and mental health issues and challenges, and questions about the future of gender marginalization in Pakistani and South Asian communities and households. Questions in all four categories were purposely kept open-ended, in order to gather information rich responses.

Each category was carefully structured to keep the sensitivity of the topic in mind. The first section allowed room to participants for more in-depth thinking and sharing their experiences. The second section was, of course, the most sensitive as it brought to the surface real life trauma and challenges for the participants. The third section on future outlook and recommendations brought the participants "out of the dark" and shared how they see or would want to see the future for their daughters and girls in their society in coming generations. They also discussed where the changes need to be made the most and what are the most crucial and vulnerable elements of gendered marginalization that need to be changed for the future.

The structure of each category was carefully designed keeping in focus the sensitivity and the personal nature of the topic. It was important to systematically address the questions and to keep the participants comfortable. The first section allowed the participants to warm up to the topic under consideration and adjust with the flow of the interview conversation, followed by sections leading to more personal questions discussing real-life experiences, struggles and challenges and lastly, closing the interview with questions seeking participant's aspirations and vision for the future and for the women of Pakistani community living in Canada. Participants highlighted the severity of the situation

by discussing the crucial elements of gender inequality in Pakistani diaspora in Canada. Table 1 shows the socio-demographics of all participants included in this research study. Table 1 has been adapted from a study by Bhandari (2017).

**Table 1**  
**Socio-Demographics Details per Participant**

Participants	Age	Visa Status	Type of Marriage	Number of Children	Education Level	Employment
Aneeta	31	Canadian Citizen	Love*	0	College graduate	Full-time
Marina	33	Canadian Citizen	Arranged	3	Post-graduate	Housewife
Noor	33	Permanent Residence	Arranged	0	College graduate	Part-time
Haniyah	36	Permanent Residence	Arranged	0	College graduate	Full-time
Rania	21	Canadian Citizen	Arranged	2	Post-graduate	Full-time
Zeniya	40	Canadian Citizen	Arranged	2	Post-graduate	Full-time
Shaina	45	Canadian Citizen	Arranged	3	College graduate	Full-time
Alayah	28	Canadian Citizen	Love	2	Post-graduate	Full-time

Note: \*Love is marriage of personal choice and arranged marriage is when families find the proposal and match partners. Adapted from "South Asian women's coping strategies in the face of domestic violence in the United States" by Bhandari S, 2017, *Health Care for Women International*, 39, 1, 220-242.

## Results and Discussion

All interviews were conducted in English language and they were simultaneously transcribed using university-approved secure video-conferencing platform. All participants had studied and completed their school, college and university education in English-medium institutions in Pakistan since childhood, therefore, they were fluent in English and comfortable to use it for the interviews.

A thematic analysis approach suggested by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to investigate the data gathered through interviews. Prior to interviews, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and they were used to analyze data and complete the research study. All interview transcripts were comprehensively studied to identify recurring patterns, conduct comparative analysis and focus on differences within the data set. Based on these patterns, data was further categorized into different themes to give structure to the analysis and present findings. Participants were also given the opportunity, if they wished, to review the transcripts and modify their responses to ensure accuracy.

**Table 2**  
**Coping and Motivational Strategies by Women from Pakistani Diaspora in Canada**

Theme 3	Associated Categories
Coping and Motivational Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Proactive approach</li> <li>2. Family and Peer support</li> <li>3. Complying</li> <li>4. Financial independence</li> <li>5. Professional help</li> <li>6. Expression and communication</li> <li>7. Taking a stand</li> <li>8. Risking beyond social expectations</li> </ol>

Analysis of the verbatim transcripts produced three main themes: (1) gendered problems encountered, (2) mental health issues, and (3) coping and motivational strategies. All three themes were further divided into eight categories based on data received from

participant interviews. As depicted in Table 2, Theme 3 which is mental coping and motivational strategies is discussed in this paper while other two themes, Theme 1, gendered problems encountered was discussed in a previous research paper (Khan, 2025) and Theme 2, self-identified and clinically diagnosed mental health issues was discussed in a subsequent research paper (Khan, 2026).

Presently, all participants stated that they have been living in Canada for more than five years and yet they face gender-based marginalization in their family structures and households which has a strong and deep-rooted socio-cultural influence. All participants stated that such continued patterns have severely affected their mental health and general well-being. Participants also highlighted continued patterns of expectations put on women in the family for keeping the family's honor and tradition and following the rules set by the elders. All respondents highlighted significantly different treatment inflicted on them by their family members and elders as compared to young boys and men of the same age group in the family.

### **Financial Independence**

Financial independence emerged as the most cited factor in coping and motivational factors. Traditionally, for generations, Pakistani women have been financially dependent on male members of the family. This dependency brings limited autonomy, restricted decision-making power and sustaining lifelong unhealthy and abusive relationships. Financial independence provides women the agency-the ability with which can make their own life choices. Participants stated that financial independence made them realize the importance of dignity and self-worth. Financial independence after migration can help navigating intersectional challenges such as limited support networks, immigration dependency such as spousal visas through marriage migration and cultural isolation.

Aneeta stated that:

“For a woman, especially a South Asian woman, the importance of financial independence is next to oxygen needed for breathing’.

Rania explained that:

“My marriage and new country move did give me a fair share of trouble for a life time but had it not been my Tim Hortons part-time job, I would have landed up in a mental health facility. It has been a decade to those days but that feeling of calculating my hourly wages and then treating myself for a little something from Sephora will always make me smile the most”.

Alayah asserted that:

“There is absolutely no question about women just marrying and relying on husband's money or working. They should not be answerable to anyone if they want to work and earn for themselves. This is the only way they can realise their self worth and the world actually treats women with work with dignity and is afraid to attack them in anyway”.

### **Proactive approach**

Rather than internalizing social marginalization and social inequity towards women, participants illustrated distinctly proactive coping mechanisms and intentional steps towards self-preservation and growth. Emotional acknowledgement and taking time to deliberately assess one's self-worth helps in processing distress and reorienting towards self-empowerment. Such conscious steps facilitate women in fostering resilience and a sense of personal agency.

Aneeta stated that:

“Growing up when I constantly felt helpless and anxious to witness the marginalization in our house towards my mom and aunts, I decided that I will proactively take charge of my life and be ready for all sorts of repercussions. It did hit me hard like any other life event when my engagement was broken but I cried, dealt with the emotional outburst and in a week’s time got up and embraced myself to what other blessings life has given me. I am open to therapy, counselling and literally any way and mechanism that can help me cope with feeling any lesser as a woman or as a human in our society”.

Haniyah asserted that:

“I was body shamed all my life until I decided from within myself to get up and do something myself. Over the years I realized that people can only be critical and sarcastic towards you, but it is only you who can be your friend and work for yourself before someone else gets a chance to call you out”.

### **Family and Peer Support**

Family support is critical to the mental and physical well-being of Pakistani women. They seek approval and solace, both from their families. Families where women support each other and consciously try to break the chain of generation trauma due to female subjugation tend to have more mentally and emotionally stable younger females. Supportive family systems promote confidence, self-worth and dignity in women.

Shaina reported that:

“My mother has always been my biggest cheer leader. She smiled through her own emotionally abusive relationship throughout her married life but always came to me and told me I have to be strong and never think that all men and humans are the same. It is her thought process that keeps me sane today. I trust in humanity and have build a great circle of friends only becuae of her support”.

Noor explained that:

“My biggest support system is my family. Both, my mom and dad are like a big shield of protection around us daughters. When I was lying down in my room a few days after my second divorce, my mom came as said what has happened to you? I looked at her in shock and confusion and replied that I am done with life as I am a two times divorcee. To this she replied, “That’s it!” Now getup, shower and change in your favorite white kurta, let’s go and celebrate you, you are our most prized gift by Allah”. This is what makes me get up everyday and take up on all challenges like a superhero way before they come to me”.

### **Taking a Stand**

Most participants argued that they have learnt from previous generations of women that speaking for themselves and breaking the chain of self-doubt, trauma and guilt is extremely important. No women should feel obligated to share her personal choices or follow decisions taken on behalf of her without her will and consent. Emotional abuse begins when a person starts accepting all kinds of behaviors inflicted towards them in the name of familial respect and honor. According to participant responses, marriage should be a mutual and respectful partnership, not a relationship where one has to be the decision-maker and the other has to follow silently.

Aneeta stated that:

“Speak for yourself before its too late. Your family members can love you and be there for you but eventually, even parents get old and weak. Stand up for yourself and never let anyone treat you like a doormat. I have made new friends in Canada who have moved to Canada after their marriages and they feel obligated to listen to their husbands and give in to their demands because the husbands are the ones who provided for them for this new beginning and they keep getting emotionally abused”.

Zeniya stated that:

“Never tell the new generation of girls and young women that they have to be silent and not give their opinion in front of the elders especially the men of the family. From childhood, hear them and make their voices heard. Women should own their decisions and never regret about anything because in life, things are constantly going up and down and it is alright to make mistakes as long as you are strong and able to stand up for the choices you make”.

### **Professional Help**

Most participants reported that due to social taboos around open discussions and seeking professional help for mental health, they had struggled for years. But the ones who took professional mental help were not only able to find their normal lives back but they were also better able to take decisions for themselves and their families. Participants also suggested community based mental health awareness talks and supportive networks especially for newly immigrated families and women in Canada.

Rania reported that:

“Talking about mental health was a big taboo in my family home. When I moved to Canada and got pregnant in just few months, I was extremely overwhelmed. When my son was born, my very sweet gynaecologist diagnosed me with postpartum depression and I was put on medication and therapy. The therapy changed my perspective on life. I felt heard, seen and safe. It gave me the self confidence to rebuild myself as a new mom and as a new comer in Canada. I wish therapy and mental help could be easily accessible to all women form our part of the world”.

Noor stated that:

“I was too young and lost after my two back to back divorced within a span of few years in my very early twenties. My friends were discussing and posting about their hobbies, graduation dresses and after party locations while I was trying to stay alive between court hearings and weird looking eyes on me. I thank the Canadian systems for making therapy so accessible that I felt more safer alone here than I have ever felt in a house full of people”.

### **Risking beyond social expectations**

Women need to take initiative where they feel they are adopting an unconventional path for themselves. In South Asian cultures, women are constantly told that the consequences of their actions will not only bring them harm but they will bring bad name to their family’s reputation. But with exposure to modern world, knowledge about women’s rights, women are trying to overcome these fears and live their lives by setting their own standards and inspiring other women around them. Participants stated that it is important to learn that everything in life has risks and women have full right to take their decisions based on their choices and live by them.

Aneeta shared that:

“ I want to scream and tell every woman around me that please do not feel scared to take a leap of faith. Have faith in yourself and take one step at a time. In Pakistan, many issues are politicised to reap benefits for one section of the society and gender marginalization tops the list. Women need to be their own voice and make their mark by moving forward and taking the risks to change the narrative”.

Noor stated that:

“For becoming the chain-breaker of generational gendered marginalization, I had to take some very unconventional steps and risk my respect and dignity. After both my divorce cases, I fought the battles bravely in foreign countries and decided not to return to my home country. Today, I live in a different city while I do have close family in other parts of Canada. But I am proud of myself to have my own house, paying my own bills and completing my education.”

### **Complying**

The participants shared that young girls are raised to be compliant and dutiful to their families and they are constantly reminded to do the same once they are married regardless of what they actually want for themselves. Most respondents stated that situations were created in everyday lives where they were pressed to just comply with what others are saying and live through it to avoid conflict. For some, it worked to keep their peace of mind while for others, it led to an eventual burnout and feelings of irritation and frustration.

Marina stated that:

“For me, the easiest coping strategy is to comply with what my in-laws and husband say. I am genuinely exhausted with my three little kids and the house work and I have no capacity to argue. I was raised and educated very different and I feel there is no use to stand up and put your point forward if the people around you are carved out from a different bone altogether”.

Noor shared that:

“Compliance is a skill that is expected to be in us Pakistani girls since birth. But I was a rebel in silence and in my mind. When I became a teen bride, all I heard in my head was to obey everyone and do as my in-laws and husband say. But a few months into my marriage, I started having a breakdown since I realized I am losing my sense of self and my mind is not working anymore. People take advantage of it and they make sure they erase all the sense of self in you and make you a robot that is befitting to their needs”.

### **Expression and Communication**

Participant responses revealed that in Pakistani culture, women are raised with a belief that they should remain quiet and not share their opinions unless they are asked in front of male members of the family. In most cases, young girls and women are not allowed to take their own personal decisions independently, for example, educational, career or marital decisions and the families especially the male members and the elderly decide for them.

Haniyah stated that:

“We women from Pakistan growing up are taught to keep quiet in front of elders and never compare ourselves to our brothers. We are taught not to talk in front of our fathers and grandfathers and keep our eyes down in front of them no matter how much we dislike their opinion. To me it is just criminal, it kills a young girl’s communication. All girls should be taught to express themselves free and talk about their emotions loudly. They should never feel ashamed of talking their heart out”.

Marina expressed that:

“I was given the top education from all the good institutions of Pakistan. Yet, all the decisions of what I will study, which courses I will take were decided by the father and his elder brother. I never knew there was any other way and at that time, I was happy even though I wanted to study something else. Now as a mother of girls, I will always listen to them and their choices and make sure no man or elders of the family take decisions on their behalf”.

## **Discussion**

The current study aimed to investigate the Coping and Motivational Strategies through Lived Experiences of Women from Pakistani Diaspora in Canada. The results highlighted multiple coping and motivational strategies implemented by participants of the research to overcome socio-cultural and migration challenges. The findings of this research align with similar previous studies on South Asian women in South Asian and in immigrant South Asian communities. In transnational context, the lived experiences and participant responses reflect convergence of gendered socio-cultural expectations, acculturative stress, and evolving agency (Samuel, 2009; Udayanga, 2024).

One of the significant findings of the study is the importance of financial independence as a coping mechanism. Participants reported that it allowed them to not just be economically sound but also participate in everyday familial decision-making, realization of their self-worth and hopefulness to change their present circumstance of inequality in their houses. Similarly, Adam (2023) reported that due to the increased participation of migrant women in economic activities, there is an increase in prospects of empowerment. Financial Independence is observed to be a tool to challenge traditional dependency roles of a woman that are deep-rooted and culturally supported all across South Asia in family systems. Traditional dependency brings restricted autonomy. Through participant responses, it has been reported that basic jobs such as hourly wages jobs and part-time jobs etc. significantly boost the confidence of migrant women and their self-perception and psychological resilience is considerably improved.

The study further investigated that proactive coping strengthens personal confidence which creates an enabling environment to cope with the challenges of gendered marginalization. Participants shared that their conscious efforts to achieve emotional regulation and self-growth helped them in realizing their self-worth. A similar previous study also highlighted the importance of self-regulation and strength-based coping mechanisms amongst women suffering from marginalization (Khanal et al., 2026). A previous study by Jaspal, Lupis & Ferozali (2025) reported women relying on passive coping strategies such as enduring abuse and inequality in silence but the present study depicts a positive shift towards active and self-directed approaches which suggests changing attitudes and hopefulness among migrant South Asian women especially the younger generations.

Similarly, one of the most significant resources as a coping strategy for South Asian women is family and peer support. Participants with supportive and enabling family

structures depicted higher levels of confidence, security and a strong sense of self-worth. A previous study by Bhandari (2017) also supports similar findings as the study highlighted the importance of informal support networks as a primary coping mechanism for South Asian women. But the present study also highlights the duality that is present in South Asian familial structures. On one hand, there are families which encourage, empower and protect their women while on the other side, there are families that perpetuate gendered roles, responsibilities and expectations which challenges the emotional repression and instability of mental health for the women. Dasgupta & Warriar (1996) explain this phenomenon in their research study which highlights the dual role of family as a source of control and support.

The associated category of taking a stand focuses on an interesting emerging form of resistance towards traditional norms of compliance and being silent. Participants shared the importance of self-advocacy and the importance of autonomous decision-making, specifically in their marital and familial contexts. These findings align with the feminist activism literature in South Asia which supports the need of challenging conservative patriarchal norms and encouraging the women's voices (Cader & Khanna, 2024; Kanagasbai et al., 2023). The present study also reflects a general shift and an increasing trend in women standing up for themselves, redefining the societal norms and breaking a chain of trauma by refusing to gendered compromise and submissiveness, both, in their homes and in the society.

Although most coping strategies implemented by the participants focus on empowerment and standing up against the traditional socio-cultural norms but due to the deep-rooted cultural conditioning and the use of religious narratives, there is still a strong prevalence of compliance as a coping mechanism. The participants reported that through their lived experiences in most situations they try to stay silent and comply with familial expectations to avoid conflict and maintain peace in their household. Most participants reported that it comes at a cost of their personal well-being but they choose it to avoid argument and tension in the family. Previous studies also reported that emotional suppression and endurance are common coping strategies used by South Asian women (Weaver et al., 2024; Jaspan, Lupis & Ferozali, 2025). But what differentiates the findings of present study from previous researches is that unlike passive compliance, women nowadays use it as a calculated strategy to maintain control and balance in their homes by avoiding immediate conflicts. This is particularly prevalent in situations where women have limited autonomy, resources and support systems.

An associated category that emerged as both, a challenge and a coping mechanism was expression and communication. Participants reported that they have restrictive autonomy and inclusivity in decision-making even on issues which are related to them and they are discouraged to share their opinions especially in the presence of male members of the family. This is further backed up with early study which highlighted gendered socialization and explained how women in South Asia are often discouraged from expression of opinion (Yoshioka & Dang, 2000). Participants shared that there is a need to shift the familial and parenting styles towards more egalitarian values where there is an existence of open communication and expression by the future generations.

Another associated category that was reported by the participants was the role of professional mental health in improving their everyday lifestyles. Since all participants were educated and had some level of exposure, they shared that accessible therapy and counselling brought a transformation in their thinking patterns which helped them in being more confident, emotionally stable and self-aware. This is a contrasting finding as compared to earlier research studies that reported hesitancy in South Asian women for seeking professional mental health services because there is strong cultural stigma attached to it (Samuel, 2009; Weaver et al., 2024). Moreover, the current findings also suggest that due to the availability and accessibility of mental health services through Canadian healthcare

situation, the present barriers to such thought processes can be broken but the policy-makers need to focus and address the issue of cultural stigma in order to help South Asian women.

The category of risk-taking beyond social expectations signifies the unconventional choices that South Asian women are taking in order to challenge the deep-rooted and culturally supported ideas of patriarchy. Participants reported that despite challenges they took life changing decisions like divorce, choosing to live independently and prioritizing their personal aspirations over social expectations. This narrative aligns with a transformative trend of resistance to traditional socio-cultural norms and support the modern feminist approach which advocates for autonomy and self-determination (Kanagasbai et al., 2023). But the participants also highlighted the significant social and emotional risks with such choices and a need for strong support systems by family and through community environments.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, the findings of this study highlight that the coping and motivational strategies implemented by Pakistani women are personalized, effective and ever evolving due to the changing nature of their environment, roles and responsibilities. As per responses, these women negotiate conflicting family situations and expectations along with their professional responsibilities by constantly figuring out ways to achieve a balance between traditional expectations and modern-day challenges through their coping mechanisms. The presence of dual-coping mechanisms discussed in a study by Nawaz and Ferdoos (2025) highlight a similar pattern where women adapt both, negative and positive coping strategies based on their everyday life circumstances.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the existing literature by providing evidence-based responses of lived experiences of women from Pakistani diaspora in Canada. It signifies the intersection of socio-cultural barriers, individual personal experience and the ability and willingness of women to persistently work on their lives and carve their own path through complex and traditional socio-cultural environments. The findings of the research also emphasize on the need of culturally enabling and responsive policy along with equally enabling support systems that recognize the unique demands of women's experiences due to their cultural backgrounds and promote inclusivity, empowerment and mental well-being.

## **Recommendations**

As per participant suggestions, the Canadian government and immigration can play an important role in supporting new immigrant women coming from Pakistan and other South Asian countries. Early support provided to these women through proper and formal authorities and government agencies can give them an exposure of their legal rights, available mental health resources, and healthcare services. Furthermore, culturally appropriate integration programs can prevent exploitation and suffering of such women and it can provide a safe start to these women in navigating their family lives effectively and confidently. Through participant discussions it was also recommended that new immigrant women can be handed over a care and guide package at immigration desks as soon as they land in Canada. This should be for their knowledge and guidance about their status and safety in Canada. Mandatory checks and follow-ups by governing bodies on the mental health, safety and overall life in their households especially in the first few months of immigration should be checked by authorities so that they cannot be put to any risk of exploitation and subjugation by their families, immediate social circles and/or workplace.

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