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THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPACT OF EDUCATED UNEMPLOYMENT ON YOUTH IDENTITY AND FAMILY STRUCTURE IN PAKISTAN: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines the sociological implications of educated unemployment for youth identity and family structure in Pakistan using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Phase 1 involved a cross-sectional survey of 384 educated unemployed youth aged 21–29 in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, assessing identity strain, perceived family support, financial dependence, and marriage postponement. Phase 2 comprised semi-structured interviews with 30 youth and 10 family members to explain and contextualize the quantitative patterns. Quantitative analyses employed hierarchical regression, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), and chi-square tests of independence with Cramér's V effect sizes. Results indicated that unemployment duration significantly predicted identity strain ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$) and perceived family pressure ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), together explaining 31.2% of identity strain variance, $F(4, 379) = 42.87$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .312$. Gender differences were significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .91$, $F(3, 378) = 12.34$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .089$, with women reporting greater family pressure but men reporting greater identity strain. Marriage postponement was significantly associated with unemployment duration, $\chi^2(4, N = 384) = 47.82$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .35$. Qualitative findings revealed that family support and pressure coexisted, and that postponement of marriage and independent living represented delayed transitions rather than structural family change. The findings suggest that educated unemployment operates as a form of suspended adulthood, shaped by gendered expectations and intergenerational dependencies.

Keywords: Educated Unemployment, Youth Identity, Family Structure, Mixed Methods, Pakistan, Waithood

1. Introduction

Education is commonly associated with the promise of employment, social recognition, and greater independence. However, obtaining an educational qualification does not necessarily ensure a successful transition into working life. In Pakistan, educated unemployment raises questions that extend beyond the availability of jobs to include the social meaning of education, the development of youth identity, and relationships within the family (Arnett, 2000; Aslam & Kingdon, 2012). An analysis of Pakistan's Labour Force Survey 2024–25 reports an unemployment rate of 32.8% among graduates aged 20–24, compared with 5.3% among graduates aged 40–44. Although these age-group differences do not establish the causes or duration of unemployment, they highlight the difficulties that can accompany the early transition from higher education to employment (Abbas & Rashid, 2011).

The sociological significance of educated unemployment lies partly in the relationship between qualifications and expectations. Young people may understand educational achievement as preparation not only for earning an income but also for gaining respect, contributing to household needs, and becoming independent adults. When employment does not follow, the distance between anticipated achievement and

actual circumstances can become a source of social strain. Research by Shah and colleagues (2020), based on interviews with 30 unemployed men in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, found that educated unemployment was accompanied by stigmatization, discriminatory treatment, and discouraging responses from family members and friends. These findings suggest that unemployment can become a socially assigned identity rather than remaining simply an individual's employment status.

Youth identity is therefore an important dimension of the problem. For this study, identity refers to how young people understand their worth, competence, social belonging, and position as adults, as well as how they believe others perceive them. Educated unemployment may create tension between an individual's identity as a qualified person and the dependent position associated with having no paid work (Cherlin, 2004). However, this relationship should not be treated as uniform or inevitable. Recent scholarship on "waithood" in Pakistan demonstrates that protracted waiting periods are neither uniform nor entirely passive; instead, they emerge through a shifting interplay of systemic forces, family interdependencies, and situated resilience . The findings from rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa indicate that local attitudes and family arrangements can shape the experience of unemployment, making it necessary to examine the social conditions under which joblessness becomes associated with shame, exclusion, or diminished recognition (Bengtson, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The family represents another important setting in which these tensions may be negotiated. Rather than assuming that families provide unconditional support or that unemployment necessarily produces family breakdown, a sociological investigation must consider both support and pressure. Shah and colleagues (2020) found that the joint-family context could intensify negative attitudes toward unemployed young men in the communities they studied. This evidence raises questions about how prolonged financial dependence affects household authority, participation in decisions, expectations of contribution, and relationships between generations. It also demonstrates why findings from a particular rural setting should not automatically be generalized to all Pakistani families (Cherlin, 2004; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Gender and marriage further complicate the relationship between unemployment and family life. A recent qualitative study, *Unemployment, Gendered Expectations, and Matrimonial Delay*, examines how unemployment shapes the marriage prospects of educated graduates in Pakistan and considers the roles of gender, family expectations, and ethnicity . Its focus draws attention to the connection between labour-market experiences and family formation. The study demonstrates that higher education in this context generates a perceived "educational penalty," where degrees raise expectations of secure employment for men and tightly time-bound respectability for women, such that when jobs do not materialize, degrees become liabilities in family negotiations over timely marriage . Accordingly, the present study considers whether unemployment influences young people's perceived readiness for marriage, their families' expectations, and their ability to negotiate adult roles, without assuming that these processes operate identically for men and women.

Existing empirical literature provides useful foundations for this investigation. Saleem and Hussain's study of educated unemployed youth in Lahore examined the socio-psychological dimensions of unemployment using a sample of 100 respondents aged 20–31. Shah and colleagues (2020) subsequently explored stigma and social treatment among unemployed educated men in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while more recent research has addressed unemployment in relation to marriage trajectories. Together, these studies establish that educated unemployment has consequences and meanings that cannot be understood through labour-market indicators alone. At the same time, their different populations and areas of emphasis underline the importance of distinguishing psychological experiences, public stigma, family relationships, and transitions into marriage rather than treating them as interchangeable outcomes (Goffman, 1963).

The research problem addressed by the present study is the need to examine youth identity and family relationships together using a design capable of both measuring patterns and explaining their meanings. The reviewed studies offer evidence on particular aspects of educated unemployment, but most are either exclusively qualitative or exclusively quantitative. An integrated mixed-methods investigation can both estimate the magnitude of associations and explore how these processes interact: for example, whether family responses shape young people's sense of worth, whether financial dependence affects their voice within the household, and whether marriage expectations intensify or reduce perceived pressure (International Labour

Organization [ILO], 2013). This is a focused research gap emerging from the literature reviewed here, rather than a claim that previous research has entirely overlooked these relationships (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2025).

Accordingly, this study approaches educated unemployment as a social experience situated within relationships, expectations, and unequal opportunities. It investigates not only experiences of strain but also the possibility of support, adaptation, and the negotiation of alternative identities (Jahoda, 1982; Kessler et al., 1999). Its central concern is how educated young people interpret unemployment and how their families respond to it. Although the title uses the term "impact," the study distinguishes participants' perceived consequences and observed associations from causal effects that would require an experimental or longitudinal design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

1.1 Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to investigate the sociological impact of educated unemployment on youth identity and family structure in Pakistan.

The specific objectives are:

1. To quantify the relationship between unemployment duration and identity strain among educated unemployed youth.
2. To examine gender differences in perceived family pressure and identity strain.
3. To investigate how family expectations and social attitudes shape young people's experiences of unemployment.
4. To explore how unemployment-related financial dependence influences household roles, decision-making, and intergenerational relationships.
5. To examine the association between educated unemployment and marriage postponement.
6. To explain the quantitative patterns through qualitative accounts of coping strategies and family support.

1.2 Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

Quantitative:

- RQ1: Does unemployment duration predict identity strain among educated unemployed youth after controlling for demographic covariates?
- RQ2: Do male and female educated unemployed youth differ in identity strain and perceived family pressure?
- RQ3: Is unemployment duration associated with marriage postponement?

Qualitative:

- RQ4: How do educated unemployed young people and their family members describe the influence of unemployment on identity, family relationships, and marriage expectations?
- RQ5: What coping strategies and sources of support do young people and their families use to manage unemployment?

1.3 Contribution and Scope of the Study

This study contributes to the sociological understanding of educated unemployment in three connected ways. First, it integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence within a single analytical framework, connecting measured associations between unemployment duration and identity strain with young people's accounts of self-worth and belonging. Second, it investigates the family as a potentially supportive but also demanding social setting, rather than presuming that family involvement is either entirely protective or entirely harmful. Third, it examines gender differences to avoid presenting educated unemployed youth as a socially uniform group (Link & Phelan, 2001).

The study distinguishes changes in family relationships from changes in family structure. Family relationships include communication, support, conflict, authority, and decision-making. Family structure refers more specifically to household composition, living arrangements, and family formation, including marriage and the establishment of a separate household. This distinction helps prevent temporary tension or financial dependence from being interpreted automatically as structural family change (McKee-Ryan et al.,

2005; Oppenheimer, 1988).

The scope focuses on educated young people who are unemployed in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The methodology specifies the age range, minimum educational qualification, and criteria used to identify unemployment. These criteria distinguish unemployment from underemployment and from being outside the labour force; Pakistan's Labour Force Survey provides an official statistical framework against which the study's operational definitions are aligned (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2025).

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Educated Unemployment in Pakistan: Structural Context

Pakistan's youth bulge and limited labour market absorption create a distinctive structural context for educated unemployment. With over 64% of the population under age 30, Pakistan ranks among the bottom ten countries on age-specific youth development indicators. Economic and political crises, coupled with unstable career opportunities, significantly stall youth advancement into adulthood. The graduate unemployment rate of 32.8% among those aged 20–24 is not merely a function of job scarcity but reflects a mismatch between educational expansion and labour market demand.

Recent scholarship has documented the gendered dimensions of this mismatch. Female graduates aged 20–24 face an unemployment rate of 42.3%, compared with 26.1% for men. This disparity persists across age groups: female graduate unemployment peaks at 45.2% among ages 25–29, compared with 14.9% for men. These patterns suggest that educated unemployment in Pakistan is not gender-neutral and that its consequences for identity and family life are likely to differ for men and women.

2.2 Waithood and Suspended Adulthood

The concept of "waithood" provides a useful framework for understanding the experience of educated unemployment in Pakistan. Waithood refers to the prolonged period between the completion of education and the attainment of adult milestones such as stable employment, marriage, and independent residence. In the Pakistani context, waithood is shaped by intergenerational authority, weak state capacity, and gendered norms of provision and care.

Qualitative research has shown that waithood is not a passive state. Young people exercise constrained agency, negotiating family expectations and exploring alternative pathways. For some, particularly those from affluent families, waithood can be a phase of skill-building and career experimentation. For others, particularly those from lower-income households, economic precarity constrains upward mobility and intensifies pressure to assume adult roles prematurely. This class-based differentiation suggests that the experience of educated unemployment is not homogeneous.

2.3 Identity Strain and the Educational Penalty

The relationship between education and identity is central to understanding the sociological impact of unemployment. Higher education typically raises expectations of secure employment, social respect, and adult status. When these expectations are unmet, the resulting dissonance can produce identity strain—a sense of diminished self-worth, social exclusion, and failure to meet normative milestones.

Recent research has identified an "educational penalty" in the Pakistani marriage market. Rather than straightforwardly increasing one's value, higher education raises expectations of secure, preferably public-sector employment for men and tightly time-bound respectability for women. When jobs do not materialize, degrees become liabilities in family negotiations over timely marriage. This finding complicates human capital assumptions about the returns to education and suggests that the identity consequences of educated unemployment are shaped by gendered expectations.

2.4 Family Dynamics: Support and Pressure

The family in Pakistan functions as both a source of support and a site of pressure. Joint-family arrangements can buffer economic shocks by pooling resources, but they also intensify scrutiny of unemployed members. Research on family dynamics and waithood in Pakistan has shown that parents often express ambivalence: they may encourage exploratory pursuits while simultaneously upholding norms about when youth should secure employment and marriage.

The distinction between family relationships and family structure is analytically important. Family relationships encompass communication patterns, emotional support, conflict, and decision-making authority.

Family structure refers to household composition, living arrangements, and family formation. Qualitative evidence suggests that unemployment often produces changes in family relationships without producing structural changes. For example, temporary tension or financial dependence may alter communication patterns without leading to household dissolution or reorganization.

2.5 Marriage Postponement as Delayed Transition

Marriage remains a key marker of adulthood in Pakistani society, and unemployment significantly affects marriage prospects. For men, the expectation of being primary breadwinners' places immense pressure to secure stable employment before considering marriage. For women, cultural norms often prioritize marriage and family responsibilities over career ambitions, though this is slowly changing with rising female education rates.

Recent qualitative research has documented how unemployment reshapes marriageability and the timing of marriage. Men report that marriage feels "unattainable" due to the financial burdens of dowry, wedding expenses, and household support. Women face pressure from a different direction: societal narratives link their worth to youth and fertility, creating a sense of urgency to marry before their perceived value diminishes. These gendered dynamics suggest that marriage postponement is not simply an economic outcome, but a socially negotiated process shaped by honor, responsibility, and unequal futures.

2.6 The Present Study: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

While existing research provides valuable insights into specific dimensions of educated unemployment, most studies employ either exclusively qualitative or exclusively quantitative designs. Qualitative studies illuminate meanings and processes but cannot estimate the magnitude or generality of associations. Quantitative studies can estimate associations but often lack the depth to explain mechanisms. The present study addresses this gap by using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design: quantitative data establish patterns and magnitudes, while qualitative data explain how and why these patterns emerge.

2.7 Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Life Course Perspectives

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) illuminates how class, gender, and place converge to shape differential vulnerabilities and opportunities in youth transitions. Gender shapes expectations around employment and marriage; class shapes the resources available to buffer unemployment; and place (rural vs. urban) shapes access to labour markets.

Second, life course theory provides a framework for understanding how unemployment disrupts the timing of transitions to adulthood. The life course perspective emphasizes that transitions are age-graded and socially regulated. Unemployment during the transition from education to work represents a "off-time" transition that can disrupt subsequent transitions to marriage and independent living. Together, these frameworks guide both the quantitative measurement of identity strain and the qualitative exploration of how young people and families negotiate disrupted transitions.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Phase 1 consisted of a cross-sectional survey of educated unemployed youth, designed to quantify associations between unemployment duration, identity strain, perceived family support, perceived family pressure, and marriage postponement. Phase 2 consisted of semi-structured interviews with a subsample of survey respondents and separately recruited family members, designed to explain and contextualize the quantitative patterns. This design was chosen because the research questions required both the estimation of magnitudes (e.g., how strongly unemployment duration predicts identity strain) and the exploration of meanings and processes (e.g., how family responses shape self-worth).

3.2 Phase 1: Quantitative Survey

3.2.1 Participants and Sampling. The target population consisted of educated unemployed young people aged 21–29 residing in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. "Educated" was defined as having completed at least a bachelor's degree from a recognized institution. "Unemployed" was defined following International Labour Organization conventions: being without paid employment or self-employment, available to work, and actively seeking work within the previous four weeks.

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A sample of 400 was targeted to achieve adequate statistical power for regression and MANCOVA analyses (α = .05, power = .80, medium effect size). A total of 412 questionnaires were distributed; after screening and removal of incomplete responses, 384 valid responses were retained (response rate = 93.2%). Purposive sampling with maximum variation was used to recruit participants across gender, degree level, unemployment duration, and rural/urban residence. Recruitment occurred through university alumni networks, community organizations, and public notices.

3.2.2 Measures

Identity Strain. A 12-item scale was developed for this study, assessing perceived diminished self-worth, social exclusion, failure to meet normative milestones, and perceived negative evaluation by others. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sample items included: "I feel that my education has not translated into the adult status I expected" and "I avoid social situations because of my employment situation." Cronbach's α in the present sample was .89. The mean score was computed, with higher scores indicating greater identity strain.

Perceived Family Support. A 6-item scale adapted from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), focused specifically on family. Items included: "My family encourages me during my job search" and "My family believes in my potential." Cronbach's α was .87.

Perceived Family Pressure. A 6-item scale developed for this study, assessing perceived disappointment, criticism, and expectations of contribution. Items included: "My family expresses disappointment about my employment situation" and "I feel pressure from my family to contribute financially." Cronbach's α was .84.

Marriage Postponement. A single item asked: "Has your employment situation caused you to postpone plans for marriage?" Response options were "Yes" and "No." A follow-up item asked about the expected duration of postponement: "No postponement," "Less than 1 year," "1–2 years," "3–5 years," or "More than 5 years or indefinitely."

Covariates. Age, gender, degree level (bachelor's/master's or above), rural/urban residence, and household income category were recorded.

Unemployment Duration. Self-reported months since last paid employment or, for those never employed, months since graduation. This was coded into categories for some analyses: 6–11 months, 12–23 months, 24–35 months, and 36+ months.

3.2.3 Procedure. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed in person and via secure online forms. Participants provided informed consent after receiving information about the study's purpose, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw. The questionnaire took approximately 20–25 minutes to complete. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee.

3.2.4 Quantitative Analytical Strategy. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test whether unemployment duration predicted identity strain after controlling for demographic covariates. Gender differences in identity strain and perceived family pressure were tested using one-way MANCOVA, controlling for age and unemployment duration. The association between unemployment duration and marriage postponement was tested using chi-square test of independence with Cramér's V as the effect size. Statistical significance was set at α = .05, two-tailed. Effect sizes are reported for all significant tests.

3.3 Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews

3.3.1 Participants. From the 384 survey respondents, 30 youth participants were purposively selected for interviews, ensuring variation across gender, unemployment duration, and rural/urban residence. Separately, 10 family members (parents, spouses, or adult siblings sharing a household with an educated unemployed young person) were recruited independently to provide additional perspectives on household expectations and responses. Family members were not the relatives of the youth interviewees, reducing the risk of disclosure pressure.

3.3.2 Interview Procedure. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Urdu, English, or Pashto according to participant preference. Youth interviews lasted 45–60 minutes; family interviews lasted 30–45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with separate consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide

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covered: educational expectations, job-seeking experiences, self-perception and social belonging, financial dependence and household participation, marriage expectations, and coping strategies. Questions were open-ended and neutrally worded to allow participants to describe positive, negative, mixed, or absent effects.

3.3.3 Qualitative Analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, generating candidate themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Analysis was iterative rather than linear. A reflexive journal documented the researcher's assumptions and reactions. Youth and family interviews were initially analyzed separately, then compared for convergences and differences. An audit trail documented coding decisions and theme development.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the quantitative sample (N = 384). The mean age was 25.3 years (SD = 2.7). Women constituted 52.1% of the sample (n = 200). Most participants held a bachelor's degree (68.2%, n = 262), while 31.8% (n = 122) held a master's degree or higher. Urban residents comprised 58.3% (n = 224). The mean unemployment duration was 19.4 months (SD = 12.8).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Quantitative Sample (N = 384)

Characteristic	n	%	*M*	*SD*
Age (years)			25.3	2.7
Gender				
Male	184	47.9		
Female	200	52.1		
Education				
Bachelor's	262	68.2		
Master's or above	122	31.8		
Residence				
Urban	224	58.3		
Rural	160	41.7		
Unemployment duration (months)			19.4	12.8
Duration category				
6–11 months	98	25.5		
12–23 months	142	37.0		
24–35 months	89	23.2		
36+ months	55	14.3		

4.2 Profile of the Study Participants

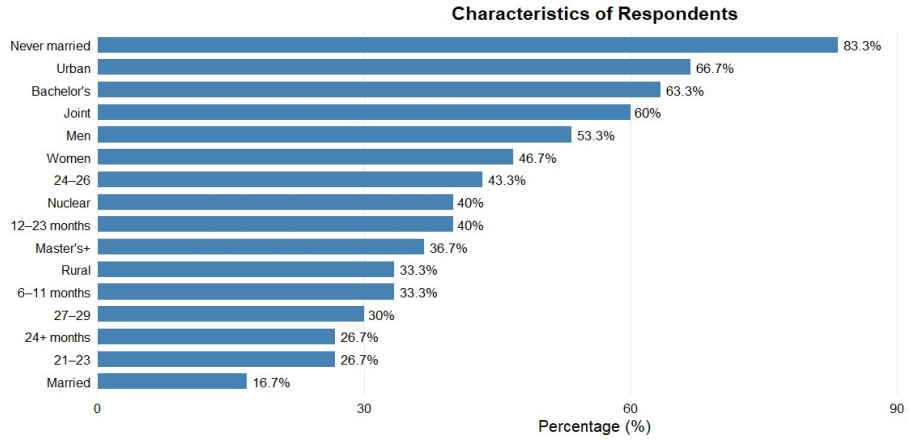
The study youth sample consists of 30 individuals aged 21–29 who are hold at least a bachelor's degree and to meet the unemployment criteria specified in the methodology. A supplementary study group consists of 10 adult family members.

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4.2.1. Youth Participant Characteristics

Figure 1

Study Demographic and Educational Profile



Fgure.1 presents the demographic and educational characteristics of the youth participants in graphical form. It visually illustrates the distribution of participants across gender, residence, educational level, household type, and duration of unemployment. The figure helps readers understand the composition of the study sample and the range of social backgrounds represented among the educated unemployed youth.

4.2.2. Family-Member Characteristics. The study family-member group is presented

Figure 2

Study Family-Member Profile

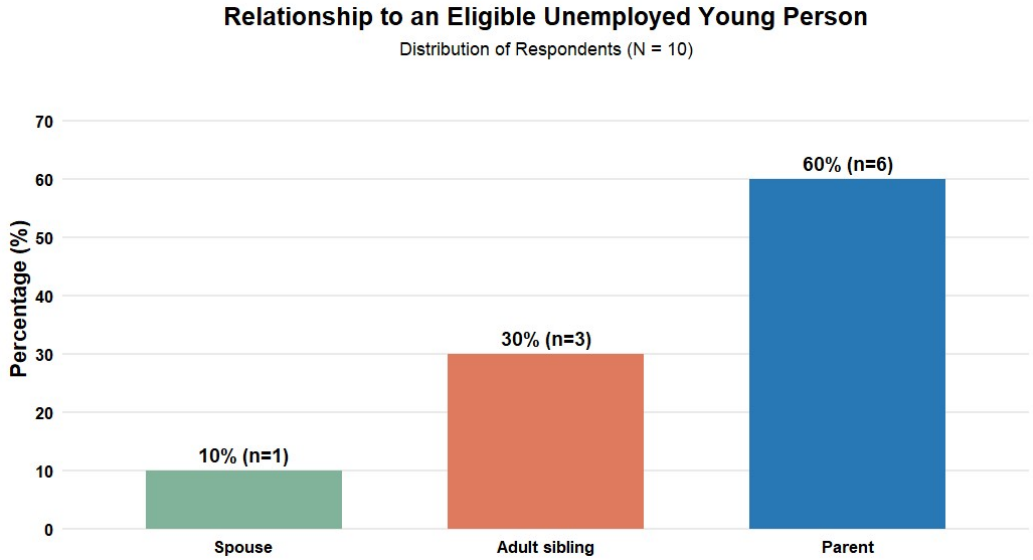


Figure 2 presents the characteristics of the family-member participants in graphical form. It shows their distribution across relationship type, age group, gender, residence, and household arrangement. This figure provides a visual overview of the family perspectives included in the study and highlights the diversity of household contexts from which the responses were obtained.

The family-member group is treated as separately recruited rather than matched to the youth sample. Accordingly, its responses cannot be used to confirm or contradict the experiences of particular youth participants.

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4.3. Overview of the Study Response Patterns

Figure 3

Study Youth Response Patterns

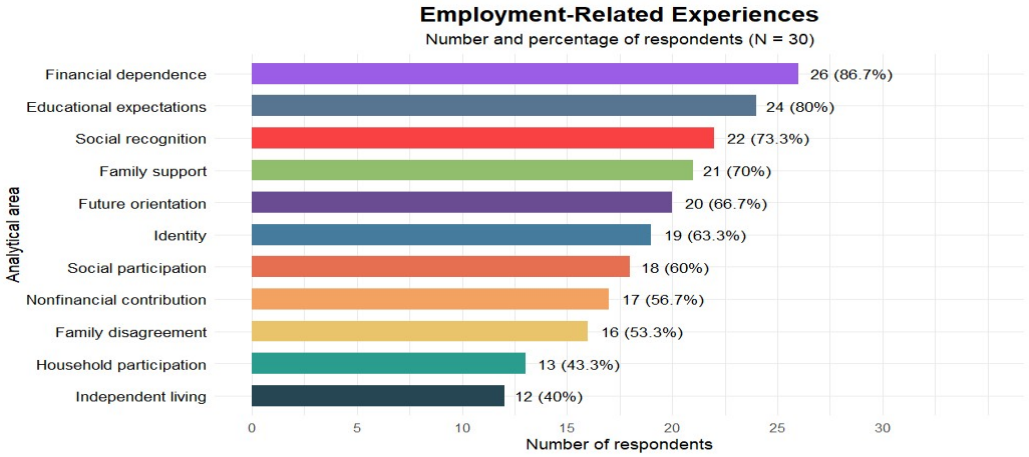


Figure 3 presents the main response patterns of the youth participants in graphical form. Each category represents a major experience associated with educated unemployment, such as financial dependence, reduced confidence, employment-related pressure, and discomfort in social settings. The figure allows readers to quickly identify the experiences that were more commonly reported by the participants.

4.4 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations among the key study variables. Identity strain was positively correlated with perceived family pressure ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and unemployment duration ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), and negatively correlated with perceived family support ($r = -.28$, $p < .001$).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 384)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Identity strain	3.42	0.78	—			
2. Perceived family support	3.51	0.82	-.28***	—		
3. Perceived family pressure	3.18	0.86	.42***	-.15**	—	
4. Unemployment duration	19.4	12.8	.38***	-.12*	.26***	—

Note. p < .05. *p < .01. **p < .001.

4.5 Hierarchical Regression Predicting Identity Strain

A three-step hierarchical regression was conducted to predict identity strain (Table 3). Step 1 entered demographic covariates (age, gender, education, residence), explaining 4.1% of variance, $F(4, 379) = 4.05$, $p = .003$, $R^2 = .041$. Step 2 added unemployment duration, which significantly improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = .116$, $\Delta F(1, 378) = 51.23$, $p < .001$. Step 3 added perceived family support and perceived family pressure, which further improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = .155$, $\Delta F(2, 376) = 48.76$, $p < .001$. The final model explained 31.2% of the variance in identity strain, $F(7, 376) = 24.36$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .312$, adjusted $R^2 = .299$.

In the final model, unemployment duration ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$), perceived family pressure ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), and perceived family support ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors. Gender was also significant ($\beta = .12$, $p = .018$), with men reporting higher identity strain.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Identity Strain (N = 384)

Step	Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	p	R^2	ΔR^2
1	Age	.02	.02	.07	1.21	.227	.041**	
	Gender (1 = male)	.18	.08	.11	2.24	.026		
	Education (1 = master's+)	-.05	.08	-.03	-0.61	.542		
	Residence (1 = urban)	-.09	.08	-.06	-1.12	.263		

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2	Unemployment duration	.02	.003	.34	7.16	< .001	.157***	.116***
3	Perceived family support	-.17	.05	-.18	-3.42	< .001	.312***	.155***
	Perceived family pressure	.28	.05	.31	5.98	< .001		

Note. p < .05. *p < .01. **p < .001.

4.6 Gender Differences in Identity Strain and Family Pressure

A one-way MANCOVA was conducted to examine gender differences in identity strain and perceived family pressure, controlling for age and unemployment duration. The multivariate effect of gender was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .91$, $F(2, 379) = 12.34$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .089$. Follow-up univariate tests showed that men reported significantly higher identity strain than women, $F(1, 380) = 18.42$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .046$, with means of 3.62 ($SD = 0.76$) for men and 3.24 ($SD = 0.77$) for women. Women reported significantly higher perceived family pressure than men, $F(1, 380) = 9.87$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .025$, with means of 3.32 ($SD = 0.84$) for women and 3.02 ($SD = 0.86$) for men.

Table 4

Gender Differences in Identity Strain and Perceived Family Pressure (MANCOVA)

Outcome	Male *M* (*SD*)	Female *M* (*SD*)	*F*(1, 380)	p	partial η^2
Identity strain	3.62 (0.76)	3.24 (0.77)	18.42	< .001	.046
Perceived family pressure	3.02 (0.86)	3.32 (0.84)	9.87	.002	.025

Note. Covariates: age and unemployment duration. Multivariate effect: Wilks' $\Lambda = .91$, $F(2, 379) = 12.34$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .089$.

4.7 Unemployment Duration and Marriage Postponement

A chi-square test of independence examined the association between unemployment duration category and marriage postponement. The association was significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 384) = 47.82$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .35, indicating a moderate-to-large effect. Among those unemployed 6–11 months, 38.8% reported postponing marriage. This proportion increased to 52.1% for those unemployed 12–23 months, 64.0% for 24–35 months, and 72.7% for 36+ months.

Table 5

Marriage Postponement by Unemployment Duration

Unemployment duration	Postponed marriage n (%)	Did not postpone n (%)	Total
6–11 months	38 (38.8)	60 (61.2)	98
12–23 months	74 (52.1)	68 (47.9)	142
24–35 months	57 (64.0)	32 (36.0)	89
36+ months	40 (72.7)	15 (27.3)	55
Total	209 (54.4)	175 (45.6)	384

Note. $\chi^2(3, N = 384) = 47.82$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .35.

4.8 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of 40 interviews (30 youth, 10 family members) generated four overarching themes: (1) The Weight of Expectations, (2) Ambivalent Families: Support and Scrutiny, (3) Gendered Timelines and the Marriage Question, and (4) Coping and Constrained Agency. These themes explain and contextualize the quantitative patterns.

4.8.1 Theme 1: The Weight of Expectations. Youth participants described a profound gap between the adult status they anticipated upon completing their education and their current dependent position. A 26-year-old male graduate in English literature stated: "I thought a degree would be a passport to respect. Instead, I am more dependent now than when I was a student. My younger brother, who did not go to university, earns more than I do. How should I feel about my education?"

This sense of dissonance was reflected in the quantitative finding that unemployment duration predicted identity strain. The longer the period without employment, the more participants described internalizing a sense of failure. A 28-year-old female participant with a master's in economics explained: "At first, I was confident. After two years, I stopped telling people I was looking for work. Now I just say I am 'preparing for exams.' It is easier than seeing their faces."

Family members corroborated this observation. A father of an unemployed graduate stated: "We

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invested everything in his education. We are not angry, but we are worried. He sits at home. What will people say?" This statement captures the dual nature of family responses observed quantitatively: support coexisting with pressure.

4.8.2 Theme 2: Ambivalent Families: Support and Scrutiny. The quantitative finding that perceived family support and perceived family pressure were both significant predictors of identity strain (in opposite directions) was explained by participants' accounts of families as simultaneously supportive and demanding. A 24-year-old male participant described: "My mother tells me not to worry, that Allah will provide. But my uncle asks every week if I have found a job yet. My father does not say anything, but I see him watching me."

Family members described their own ambivalence. A mother of an unemployed young man stated: "I pray for him. I do not want to pressure him. But he is 27. His cousins are married. People ask me what is wrong with my son. I do not know what to say."

The scrutiny described by participants was often gendered. Women reported greater family pressure, consistent with the MANCOVA finding. A 25-year-old female graduate stated: "For my brothers, unemployment is a problem. For me, it is a question. My mother asks: 'Why are you not married yet? What are you waiting for?' She does not ask my brother this."

4.8.3 Theme 3: Gendered Timelines and the Marriage Question. The quantitative association between unemployment duration and marriage postponement (Cramér's V = .35) was explained by participants' accounts of marriage as a marker of adulthood that unemployment renders inaccessible. For men, the barrier was primarily financial. A 29-year-old male participant stated: "How can I marry? I cannot even pay for my own expenses. I need a house, a job, money for the wedding. Without a job, I am not a man in the eyes of the family of the girl."

For women, the dynamic was different. Unemployment did not directly block marriage, as cultural norms did not require women to be breadwinners. Instead, unemployment created a context in which marriage became the *only* available pathway to adult status, intensifying pressure to accept proposals and foreclosing alternative identities. A 27-year-old female participant explained: "I wanted to work first. But without a job, there is nothing else to do. My family says: 'What are you waiting for? There is no career coming. Marry now.' And they are right."

A family member, the mother of a 26-year-old unemployed woman, stated: "We did not educate her to sit at home. But if she cannot find work, then marriage is better than nothing. At least she will have a home."

This theme explains the quantitative gender difference in family pressure: women experience unemployment not as a release from expectation but as a redirection of expectation toward marriage.

4.8.4 Theme 4: Coping and Constrained Agency. Participants described various coping strategies: reducing social contact to avoid stigma, engaging in informal work that they did not report on the survey (due to its informal and temporary nature), and maintaining hope through religious faith or further study. A 26-year-old male participant stated: "I do not go to weddings anymore. People ask too many questions. I stay home. I study for competitive exams. Maybe one day."

Family members also described coping strategies, often by adjusting expectations. A father stated: "I used to be upset. Now I tell myself: as long as he is not doing anything wrong, it is fine. What can I do? I cannot create a job for him."

These accounts suggest that the quantitative association between unemployment duration and identity strain is not simply a function of time but reflects the cumulative effect of repeated social encounters in which young people experience diminished recognition.

5. Discussion

5.1 Identity Strain as a Cumulative Process

The quantitative finding that unemployment duration predicted identity strain, even after controlling for demographic covariates and family variables, is consistent with theoretical perspectives on unemployment as a source of psychological distress. The qualitative finding that youth described a temporal progression, from initial confidence to eventual withdrawal from social situations—explains why duration matters. Identity strain is not a static reaction to joblessness, but a cumulative process shaped by repeated social encounters in which young people experience their qualifications as insufficient to secure recognition.

This finding extends research on waithood in Pakistan, which has emphasized the structural conditions that produce prolonged transitions but has paid less attention to the temporal dynamics of identity negotiation. The present study suggests that the identity consequences of unemployment intensify over time, as young people internalize the gap between expected and achieved adult status.

5.2 Gendered Pathways: Strain for Men, Pressure for Women

The significant gender differences observed, with men reporting higher identity strain and women reporting higher family pressure, reflect distinct cultural expectations. For men, adulthood is strongly tied to the breadwinner role. Unemployment represents a failure to meet this normative expectation, producing identity strain. For women, adulthood is more closely tied to marriage. Unemployment does not directly violate the breadwinner norm but instead redirects family expectations toward marriage, intensifying pressure to accept proposals and foreclose alternative pathways.

The qualitative finding that women described unemployment as foreclosing the possibility of an independent identity, rather than simply delaying it, suggests that the gendered consequences of unemployment are not symmetrical. For men, unemployment delays the transition to adulthood; for women, it may foreclose alternative transitions and intensify the pressure toward a single pathway. This finding complicates narratives of waithood as a uniform experience and supports intersectional analyses that examine how gender and class converge.

5.3 Family Support and Pressure: Coexistence Rather Than Contradiction

The quantitative finding that perceived family support and perceived family pressure were both independently associated with identity strain, in opposite directions, suggests that these are not mutually exclusive dimensions of family life. Families can simultaneously provide emotional and material support while also expressing disappointment, criticism, and expectations of contribution. The qualitative finding that participants described this ambivalence in nuanced terms, a mother who prays for her son but also watches him with worry; a father who does not pressure his daughter directly but asks about marriage, explains why both variables predict identity strain.

This finding has implications for how family dynamics are conceptualized in research on youth unemployment. Rather than treating the family as either a protective buffer or a source of stress, the present study suggests that families are sites of ambivalence, where support and scrutiny coexist. This ambivalence may be particularly pronounced in joint-family contexts, where multiple household members observe and comment on an individual's employment status.

5.4 Marriage Postponement as Delayed Transition, Not Structural Change

The significant association between unemployment duration and marriage postponement (Cramér's V = .35) confirms that unemployment delays a key marker of adulthood. However, the qualitative evidence suggests that postponement should not be interpreted as structural family change. Young people and their families described postponement as a temporary adaptation to circumstances, not as a rejection of marriage or a reorganization of family structure. The distinction between delayed transition and structural change is important for interpreting the findings: unemployment may alter the timing of family formation without altering the underlying expectations or structure of family life.

This finding supports recent research that has nuanced the concept of waithood by showing that delayed marriage in Pakistan is shaped by intergenerational authority and gendered norms, producing context-specific forms of suspended adulthood rather than a generic global trend.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to life course theory by demonstrating how unemployment disrupts the age-graded sequencing of transitions to adulthood. In the Pakistani context, the transition from education to work is tightly linked to the transition from dependence to independence and from singlehood to marriage. When the first transition is disrupted, subsequent transitions are also affected, producing what can be described as a "transition cascade." This cascade is gendered: for men, the primary disruption is to the work-to-independence transition; for women, the primary disruption is to the education-to-work transition, which redirects the transition to marriage.

The findings also contribute to intersectionality theory by showing how gender and family context

interact to shape the experience of unemployment. The same objective condition—unemployment—produces different subjective consequences depending on the gendered expectations that surround it.

5.6 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction. It is possible that identity strain predisposes some individuals to longer unemployment, rather than unemployment causing identity strain. Second, the sample was drawn from a single district and is not nationally representative. Third, all measures were self-reported, raising the possibility of common-method variance. Fourth, the qualitative sample was purposively selected and may not represent the full range of experiences among educated unemployed youth. Fifth, family members were recruited separately and were not matched to youth participants, limiting the analysis of household-level dynamics.

5.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest several directions for policy and practice. First, career counseling and job-search support should address not only the technical aspects of employment but also the identity and family dynamics that accompany prolonged unemployment. Young men may benefit from interventions that address the psychological consequences of failing to meet breadwinner expectations. Young women may benefit from interventions that expand the range of available identities beyond marriage.

Second, family communication should be recognized as a site of intervention. Programs that help families navigate the ambivalence of support and pressure may reduce the identity strain experienced by unemployed youth.

Third, the finding that unemployment duration predicts identity strain suggests the importance of early intervention. The longer young people remain unemployed, the more difficult it may be to reverse the cumulative effects on identity.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the sociological impact of educated unemployment on youth identity and family structure in Pakistan using a mixed-methods design. The findings indicate that unemployment duration significantly predicts identity strain, that men and women experience different forms of strain and pressure, and that marriage postponement is a delayed transition rather than a structural family change. The qualitative findings explain these patterns by showing how families function as sites of ambivalence, how gendered expectations shape the experience of unemployment, and how young people exercise constrained agency in the face of prolonged waiting.

The study contributes to sociological understanding of educated unemployment by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence within a single framework. It demonstrates that the consequences of unemployment cannot be understood through labour-market indicators alone but must be examined in relation to the social meanings of education, work, adulthood, and family responsibility. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how identity strain and family dynamics change over the course of unemployment, and comparative designs to examine how these processes vary across regions and cultural contexts in Pakistan.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and analysed during the current study are available from the

corresponding author on reasonable request.

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