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# The negotiations of Pakistani mothers' agency with structure: towards a research practice of hearing '*silences*' as a strategy

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## ABSTRACT

Research shows that in Pakistan, daughters of educated mothers are likely to be enrolled in school, thus proposing a decontextualised relationship between mothers and their daughters' education. This article draws on interview data to narratively analyse the situated experiences of Pakistani mothers for supporting their daughters' education. When mothers' life stories are analysed, a lifelong strategy of *silences* is revealed. Through the construct of *silences*, I challenge myself and other educational researchers to 'unlearn' the hegemonic epistemic cues that bind us to certain ways of knowing instead develop a critical openness to the perspectives of mothers and become 'hearers'. This article situates itself within the debates on epistemic justice – proposing a practice of critical 'hearing' to understand the lifelong situated experiences of mothers in Pakistan.

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## 1. Introduction

In Pakistan, a global focus on girls' education has translated into commitments made by the state to ensure gender equality in education (Government of Pakistan 2017). An extensive body of literature has sought to understand the underlying issues that widen the gender gap in schooling. However, only mothers' influence on various predictors of educational achievement have been highlighted (Khan and Karamat 2005). This articulation encourages an exploration of the role of mothers but on the macro level, it also presents them as instruments for human capital accumulation through inputs in girls' education, without contextualising their efforts as agents. Literature on empowerment which touches on mothers' agency makes simplistic comparisons between often decontextualised measurements of empowerment and its relationship with intergenerational educational achievements (Mahmud, Nirali, and Stan 2012).

Some research has engaged more deeply with the power relations navigated by Pakistani women at the macro and micro levels using qualitative methodologies. Historical accounts

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inform about the struggles of Pakistani women (Naz et al. 2013; Ali 2015), their covert resistance to hegemonic patriarchal systems and their capacities to transform gendered norms (Bhatti and Roger 2012; Noureen 2015), sometimes culminating in gaining control of their families' educational decisions (Ashraf and Iffat 2007). However, this work only provides evidence that with increased education or power within the family, mothers gain the potential of supporting their children's well-being through education. Hence, there is little known about the experiences through which mothers seek and achieve their educational aspirations for their daughters. Researchers need to *hear* closely how mothers engage and disengage through interaction between agency and structure through uttered and unsaid words, actions and inaction, holding and withholding aspirations. In an effort to do this kind of *hearing*, I ask how do we as *hearers* (researchers) make the voices of mothers audible as they pursue their aspirations for their daughters' education?

This work is a critique on the education and development discourse that paints the women and (mothers in this case) of the South as disempowered (Koffman, Shani, and Rosalind 2015). Such vocabulary creates decontextualised ideas that generate accepted discourses of Southern girls and women as education seekers, who are in conflict with their families, cultures and traditions without much effort of engaging with these women to hear their own experiences (Khoja-Moolji 2018; Khurshid and Alexis 2018).

The ideas are in conflict with feminist ideals of relational autonomy that describe the world of women in relational terms (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Decontextualised ideals of women's autonomy mask the interdependent relationships of exchange through which women negotiate within their environments effectively so that agency is not always cancelled by structural constraints. This challenges universalism and the Eurocentric liberal feminist ideologies that render the voices from the margins unheard (Khader 2018). Deviating from the western world-sense, this work emerges from the decolonial ontology of a world that functions with various forms of oppression, where women's struggles are constructed within structures of interdependent relationships on multiple levels (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). I raise two points, first there is evidence to suggest that women use their education to construct an empowered subjectivity for themselves using modes that may not agree with the universal autonomous singular (Shah and Ayesha 2019). Second, the relationship between *women's agency* and their *opportunity structures* is not always confrontational: they may be exercising power without engaging in an active resignification of hegemonic norms and the relationship between agency and structure need to be analysed along a life course and not separately. Whilst women encounter intersectional oppression relating to poverty, class, ethnicity and location (Crenshaw 1991), they also have to negotiate these barriers as parents 'to culturally authorize their daughters as legitimate actors' (Hussain 2020, 1).

For families descended from and living in, rural South Asia, family relationships take a central place in the social makeup (Arnot and Arif 2014). Against this background, it is not just the mothers' characteristics, and their agency that are relevant, but also, the social context and the negotiations that this entails. Going forward, first, agreeing with DeJaeghere (2018), I argue that the agency and structure exist in a dialectic relationship even if at times they oppose each other. Second, I propose for the researcher to adopt an epistemic paradoxicality in interpreting the exercise of agency within structure as a strategy of *silences* along the life course. To achieve this, I position myself as a *hearer* of the lifelong *silences* that mothers use to work towards their aspirations for their daughters' education.

## 2. Context, methods and researcher positionality

Pakistan's geo-political history shows that a bittersweet relationship has existed between women's claims to their *voice* and the state's efforts to curtail their agency. The year 1977 was a defining year in the history of women and education, when a coup resulted in General Zia ulHaq becoming the president of Pakistan. Zia's regime (1977–1988) is notoriously known to have gathered support by mobilising fundamentalist religious groups. This was done through formal and informal measures enacting a particular idea of *womanhood* limited to the private (domestic) sphere (Jafar 2005). During this time, the state also engaged in a geo-political alliance to dismantle the Soviets in the neighbouring Afghanistan (Lau 2006). Some regressive laws were introduced for women as part of Zia's theory 'Chadar-aur-chaar-dewari' (The veil and four walls – women to remain within the four walls of the house). In 1983, when Zia tried to have the witness law passed (women's testimony for a rape allegation counted for half and in failing to produce a witness, a woman could be charged with adultery with capital punishment), regardless of the ban on public demonstrations at the time, women mobilised and took to the streets. During this time, the state coordinated strict regulation of educational practices and school curriculum.

The next decades saw the withdrawal of the Soviet from Afghanistan that ensued a political struggle for power. In the year 2001, on the frontline for the War on Terror Pakistan was in political upheaval with militants conducting suicide bombings within the cities of Pakistan (Coughlan 2015). Almost one third of the thousands of schools destroyed were institutions of girls' education. Once again, through violent extremism a similar idea of womanhood suited for the private (domestic) sphere was enacted albeit with a difference. The militant groups believed schools to be a public sphere where women need not participate thus targeted girls' schools. In this time of reduced educational access for girls, women's voice was also regulated through extremist fundamentalism (DAWN 2002). However, it is worthwhile to remember the historic struggles of women to publicly push back on force against gendered oppression.

In a tug-of-war between women, education and the politics of state power, the symbolic 'chadar-aur-chaar-dewari' has to some extent, prevailed in the social machinery. However, the state has shown commitment towards the agenda of education for all. Following an amendment to the Constitution Article 25A was introduced in the year 2010, which made the state responsible for education (children aged 5–16 years). In Punjab, the site for data collection, the government was quick to respond by launching the Government of Punjab's Schools Roadmap to Reform Programme. The reforms aimed at improving access to education but was weakly implemented (Ali 2011).

On the family level, barriers are multidimensional but male resistance to education is often highlighted (Warrington and Kiragu 2012). To gain a holistic understanding, it is essential to engage with the intersectional complexity of this issue (Crenshaw 1991). For example, distance to school may increase the chance of harassment which would be perceived by the family to bring dishonour. To avoid this, a male member may need to chaperone their sister or daughter which is not sustainable if the family depends on the earnings of the male member to survive. However, there is evidence to suggest that when mothers are given the space to act, they support their daughters' education (Sharma and Wotipka 2019). This paper is situated within this background.

In 2017, I conducted interviews in three rural communities of Punjab Pakistan. The broader project aimed to understand how mothers in rural Pakistan were shaping their daughters' education. Most of the previous literature found that mothers' support is a plausible variable for girls' education but, mothers were mostly conceptualised as the means to an end rather than their efforts as active and agentic (see also Manion 2007). The project, therefore, adopted a capability lens and explored the mothers' aspirations for their daughters' education evaluating whether they had real opportunities to fulfil their dreams. 30 families with a mix of mother-daughter education status were selected through purposive selection. Multiple members of each family including, mothers, daughters, heads of household and sometimes, sons were also interviewed. Therefore, the total number of the families was 30 but within these 65 interviews were conducted. The table shows some key demographics of the sampled families (Table 1).

The sampled communities have distinct characteristics. Economically, a majority of the families have a low or lower middle-income background. Chak-Ameeran and Sangar are more developed with regards to location and provision of education, as compared to Virasatpur. Chak-Sangar is homogenous caste-wise, whereas the other two are more varied. According to the participants, the schools in Chak-Sangar and Ameeran provide quality education, whereas economically weak participants in Virasatpur were unhappy with the schools in their community. In all three communities, participants felt that the community was receptive to girls' education but had inconsistent views about employment and jobs.

In the field, I wore several identities, a Pakistani mother, a woman who shared a gendered history and had aged through the socio-political disruptions in the same country as well as a researcher from *bahr-mulk* (foreign). I often asked myself, 'who am I as the narrator claiming to be the *hearer* of these stories?' In my embodied identity I felt like I had legitimate claim over my ability to *hear* their voices based on the shared historical and gendered experiences. I too had grown up as a woman through this time, born just at the peak of Zia's regime. There were moments when I saw this recognition in the eyes of mothers as they said, 'you know how it is don't you'. We drew on this strange

**Table 1.** Demographic description of data (to appear on Page 6 of the main document).

Sample summary (N = 30)	
Number who completed school	
Mothers	13
Fathers	22
Average years of schooling	
Mothers	8 years (highest was 10 years)
Fathers	9 years (highest 14 years)
Average Age	
Mothers	40
Fathers	47
Average family size	5 children
Number of mothers who earned an income	14
Type of income generation activities undertaken by:	
Mothers	Labour worker, seamstress, cattle rarer, farmer, handmaiden, shop keeper
Fathers	Landowner, teacher, military service, Labour worker, cattle rarer, farmer, shop keeper

comfort of familiarity that came from mutual experiences of *prevailing* as a woman and a mother.

As a researcher I was on strange land, a Pakistani female academic, from a university in the North. Informed by the global, national and local discourse, I found my identity levitating in a liminal *third space*, as I engaged conceptually with the experiences of these mothers (Bhabha 2004). My discomfort arises from the acknowledgement that my knowledge has been produced in colonial structures of learning, thus making me conscious that what I knew from before may not be as relevant as the situated experiences being narrated to me by these mothers (also see English 2005). Here, the idea of *third space* allows me to view mothers as agents constantly negotiating their identities, with the shifting needs of their social worlds and my identity also in flux.

I draw some solace in the recognition that my claim to be a hearer is not based on a desire to legitimise my privilege to speak for others. Rather, my aim is to challenge myself and others (researchers), to 'unlearn' the ways in which we have been educated, to make sense of people's voices. This approach has come to me as a result of what Fricker (2003, 162) calls 'epistemic revolution'—an event when the researcher struck by surprise realises the fallacy in their previous knowledge, thereby pushed to engage in a reflexive process of self-correction. This epistemic revolution came when I engaged in conversation with the participant mothers and realised that my ideas failed to provide me with the tools to make sense of the richness of the experiences that were being narrated to me. Previous scholarship has placed mothers' schooling and autonomy at the epicentre for their daughters' educational achievement. My interactions with these women showed that their ability to aspire and enact their agency was not necessarily related to their own experience of formal learning or the power they wielded in their own families. Mothers navigate this third space in their daily life decisions in contexts of disadvantage and deprivation, whilst also maintaining their ability to imagine and enact transformative aspirations for their daughters. This capacity for action is not a novel discovery but has been evidenced elsewhere in the literature (Khan and Nida 2018). Caught in the moment of 'epistemic revolution', I questioned the inefficiency of my knowledge and the analytical tools with which I had sought to interpret the experiences of these mothers – I knew that my epistemic hearing was impaired.

There was, power in the ways that mothers navigated their aspirations and laid claim to their position as a *speaker*, but how could an inadequate hearer articulate this power? This moral dilemma for the hearer can be explained with Fricker's description of a researcher's approach of 'critical openness to the word of others' (2003, 161). In the course of this research, time and again, my assumptions based on previous research have been challenged and this is what led me to propose an epistemic paradoxicality to the inward-looking researcher—to unsettle hegemonic assumptions and approach the data with an open mind. This would begin by imagining the everyday efforts in the stories of these mothers as evidence arising from 'the concrete relations and weaves of life we inhabit' to produce insights into the experiences of these mothers (Das 2014, 280). In the section that follows, I discuss the weave of life by exploring the theoretical connections between the agency and structures within which mothers function.

### 3. The shifting relationship between agency and structure

Sen describes an agent as a person, 'who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well (1999, 18)'. Personal efforts need to be matched with structural reorganisation and/or social change to bring about results for the agent. According to this view, agency will lead to achievements for the agent bounded within structural and opportunity constraints (Bourdieu 1990; Sen 1995). A prospective agent who is habituated within a social frame of living is more likely to be limited within this boundary. What is crucial here is that women are able to negotiate across these boundaries to achieve their aspirations (Conradie 2013). This was also true for the participant mothers who persistently acted every day to make their aspirations come true. Agency can also be imagined as socially negotiated and enacted (Deneulin and Lila 2009). The analysis of mothers' educational aspirations revealed their aspirations for their daughters to have 'more choices and 'independence' in life, something they were deprived of in their own lives.

Women's aspirations occupy an interesting space in understanding their agency having a relationship of navigation (Hart 2012; Conradie 2013; DeJaeghere 2018). Literature on agency has moved beyond the idea that aspirations remain 'realistic' for the underprivileged (Gottfredson 2002), to suggest that futuristic aspirations and their associations with agency are not reserved for the rich only (Conradie and Ingrid 2013). Aspirations for most 'are dialectically related to agency, they are dynamically changing over time' (DeJaeghere 2018, 239). Elaborating on this dialectic relationship Bourdieu and John (1986) provides some valuable conceptual resources such as the *fields* in which mothers exist (family, community and home) and the cultural *capital* or social resources that are produced as a result of their interaction within these fields. Within these fields, mothers' agency in relation with these structures guided through their aspirations is malleable, being negotiated with respect to equally dynamic fields. Aspirations act like a kind of bridge, with the help of which, the enactment of agency is supported in constrained circumstances. What does this mean for a researcher aiming to understand the agency enactment of mothers in such a dynamic space?

The most important consideration would be to approach analysis with epistemic paradoxicality. This requires preconceived predictors of agency/power to be abandoned in favour of a new space that allows for novel ways of hearing the multivocality in the data (Gilligan 1977). In her work, Unterhalter (2014, 2019) proposes a 'method of reflexive comparison' involving a process of critical reflection on the identity and the historical location of the researcher and their ability to make comparisons across time and space. In search of their identity the researcher needs to turn back on themselves and engage in a reflexive process. Following this process has led me to position my identity and history within the ambit of the participants' experiences. Thus, demonstrating the value of a critically reflexive process in which researchers may question the analytical methods through which they understand the narratives heard. I argue for an acceptance that our methods of analysis may not be advanced enough to make some voices heard. I propose the recognition of an agency-structure relationship of 'silences' as a lifelong strategy of disengaging and re-engaging with the structure used strategically to seek long-term gains. Turning once more to some of the conceptual resources offered by Bourdieu

and John (1986), I argue that *silences* are a form of emotional capital (cultural capital in its embodied state described as ‘dispositions of the mind and the body’, 243). Manion (2007) argues that in the embodied state emotional capital becomes a way of expressing the perceptions, thoughts and actions of people. Thus, while the aspirations guide the agency-structure relationship strategically used *silences* (paradoxical) act as the vehicles through which emotional capital is transformed into the ability to pursue goals.

#### 4. Moving beyond the conceptions of silences as paradoxical

There is work on silences that makes a case for the paradoxicality of silence (Parpart and Parashar 2019). Hansen (2019) argues that voice is historically associated with violence and voice as power. In such work, false binaries are created so that silence will always be the undoing of voice and by inference power. She draws on the case of war, when voice would put people in immediate threat, so a person strategizes in using their silence and voice. If they do not speak it does not mean that they are pawns to oppression (although violence is prevalent in their situation) but in deciding when and where to speak calls forth a consciousness. Although the articulation of silence as violence is certainly true for much of the feminist work which has been to ensure that marginalised voices of the women were heard loud and clear (Madhok et al. 2013). However, in a rapidly internationalising world where global hierarchies of power have pushed many towards the margins, it is important to remain neutral in our analytical approach (Khader 2018). Therefore, as Hansen argues it is important to refrain from approaching women with a preconceived binary approach about silence. The works mentioned therefore have already brought us to understand silence as morally neutral generative and/or oppressive thus paradoxical. Incorporating silences in this way is suited for an exploration of mothers’ agency in complex gendered terrains, where historic conditions of oppression create modes of communication in which cultures of silence are created (negatively and positively practiced), and silence is used as a language. Diba’s situation is a good example,

I was angry at him, so I stayed quiet all the way ... When we came back, I told him that I wanted to have that purse. He went to Kohat the next day for a job and brought back two purses for me.

Diba’s statement suggests that silences when deeply embedded (though conceived under conditions of inequality) become a means of expression in themselves for those who are using them. This aligns with some feminist work which articulates women’s power as something that ‘that is inherent in us, as the power to grow is inherent in a seed’ (Starhawk 1987, 8). Examples of such power can be observed in the reactions of some mothers like Diba makes informed choices at appropriate times to provide education for her children in the best way possible. This makes her a knower of her own experience and story, at this point her situated knowledge supersedes other forms of knowledge. In line with the lived experience approach (Shah and Ayesha 2019), women need to be seen as knowers when we as researchers seek to understand the social processes and modes through which they gain agency. However, Sylvester (2019) reminds us that silence should not be seen as a heroic condition without scrutinizing the context within which they are generated.

In this article, I move beyond the undoing binaries and paradoxical *silences* approach to suggest that silence/voice is not merely a false binary but is actually a strategy of lifelong negotiations between agency and structure. I first discuss what I mean by silence, voice and *silences*. Silence is understood figuratively, an intentional disengagement/refusal to speak, act and/or aspire. Voice would therefore mean an intentional re-engagement/speaking, acting and/or aspiring. These ideas although broader are still a binary (i.e. silence as withholding and voice as doing) as in the work of Parpart and Swati (2019). However, the concept of *silences* that I introduce goes beyond this and proposes *silences* as an active lifelong strategy used by women to choose when to be silent or to speak, while working towards their aspirations. In this sense, *silences* has elements of silence and voice combined (as when disengagement is broken voice emerges) but more importantly will be recognisable through a dialectic relationship between aspirations-agency and structure.

I would like to emphasise that *silences* as a strategy forefront mothers as 'knowers and doers' and are seen as an active strategy with temporal and adaptive elements. I would further make a case that the relationship between agency and structure and the links with aspirations are important but more important is the active lifelong approach of *silences* which helps them navigate agency effectively so that structures do not necessarily cancel out agency. Before discussing the specific stories, I first elaborate on familial, economic status and mothers' control over family decisions which revealed their efforts to negotiate with structures.

The multivocal stories showed a rich practice of navigating structural constraints which were visible once I tried to adopt an active approach to *hearing* that which was not said and done. I found that *silences* took many forms in different life stories. Consider the four stories of Nusrat, Wajeeha, Tehmina and Kulsoom. Nusrat claims to have decision-making power in her family (lone family); however, some decisions are beyond her and are taken by her brother guided by the societal expectations. Wajeeha belongs to a joint family and has no power over family decisions. Unfortunately, her father-in-law who heads her family would only allow her daughters to complete primary school. A comparative analysis of the *silences* observed by these mothers shows the similarities between them even though their family structures are very different. Tehmina lives in a nuclear family and has considerable control over family matters. Her husband (head of family) is not so keen on education. Kulsoom, on the other hand, only participates in minor family decisions and lives in a joint family, whilst her husband fully supports their daughter's education. Again, Tehmina and Kulsoom's stories analysed through the lens of *silences* over a lifespan reveals consistencies between their approach. Both were strategic in their *silences*, withholding action and voice at key points to ultimately gain control over their lives.

In this way, all the mothers at one point or another would use *silences* in paradoxical ways, for some it would achieve their aspirations. However, an analysis of *silences* does not just tell the stories of 'achievement and success' which are relative and subjective but rather the power in disengaging and re-engaging with structures. In this sense each story over a life span is a story of struggle and the efforts to channel power by navigating structures. To understand *silences* as a lifelong strategy I present readings of two stories in particular. With this reading I aim to bring the experiences of navigating agency through structural constraints as a strategy of *silences* which when analysed through a life span shows its strategic colours.

## 5. 'I don't encourage them [my daughters] ... they really long for it [education] but Allah knows best' (Nusrat): a story of 'silencing'

This is the story of a mother Nusrat whose lifelong efforts show us how *silences* are employed towards a future oriented agency by navigating structures. Through Nusrat's story it is possible to understand that silence and voice are used with intentionality, sometimes to withstand a difficult situation and other times to re-engage and take strong actions. Other times they are chosen to avoid the frustrations of unmet aspirations. When analysed along the life course as a continuum the use of silences as a strategy is revealed to show her power to prevail.

Oppression needs to be seen as intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) and that it is too simplistic to hold explicit patriarchy to account for women's experiences of disempowerment. Nusrat lives with her five children, four daughters and a son in Chak-Sangar, where access to education is relatively good. Her husband abandoned the family when her children were young and with his wage being lost, she was confined to a life of deprivation in her in-law family home. Refusing a life of deprivation Nusrat decided to leave them. She moved out with her brothers' support and has since lived in a house owned by one of them. She followed a desire to have a life with better opportunities for her children.

She is now a seamstress and runs a small haberdashery. Her brothers help her by contributing towards groceries and she works so that she does not have to rely on them financially. After moving to her brother's house, she was finally able to enroll her younger three children in school. The event of moving out is an indication of her use of agency and voice but as we read ahead, I argue that there are events that urge her to curtail options that could help her family with upward mobility. This apparent 'silencing' needs to be read in tandem with her earlier 'voice' (moving out) trusting that as 'knowers' they are engaged in a strategic use of both (silence-voice/'silences') to make meaningful decisions for their families.

Her elder daughters had not attended school in their earlier years, but now were studying at a madrassah. When one of their teachers saw her daughters' enthusiasm for education, she started tutoring them for free. Both the girls completed primary and secondary school and are now studying for their first-degree through distant learning. Her eldest daughter Nazma had chosen to become a teacher and was tutoring children alongside her own studies. The second, Nafeesa, was planning to open her own madrassah once her studies were completed and the third, Naseema, wanted to get an office job after completing her education. Whilst Nusrat seems to have exercised her power to sever ties with her in-law family, further exploration of her story shows that even when empowered actions are enacted, social contracts in patriarchal systems sometimes lead to disempowered choices, thus embracing a silence of oppression.

Nusrat's daughters oblivious to social expectations were motivated to pursue professional careers but Nusrat knew that stepping out of the *chaar dewari* (four walls) may not be possible, so she practices silence to consciously diminish their opportunities. Between her daughter's desires and societal obligations, Nusrat was in a predicament. She said:

The younger one wants to get a job somewhere. She wants to progress and study more. She says she will observe full *pardah* [veil] but will prefer to get a job. The youngest wants to get a

job too. [laughs] ... I don't encourage them for a job but they want it. I just think that it is not too good for women to step out of their homes ... they really long for it but Allah knows best. I have my opinions they have their own, Allah will decide what's best.

Nusrat's predicament is that even though she discourages her daughters from desk-type jobs, she cannot contain her yearning for her daughters' success. For Nusrat, the male patriarch is absent, she earns an income, and yet, the invisible social structures and her limited resources hamper her aspirations for her daughters' education. One way of seeing Nusrat's behavior is in terms of self-surveillance (see Bartky 2015) – self-policing acts that symbolise obedience to domination. However, Nusrat's conformity, according to her, had a clear rationale,

In trying to persuade me, (Naseema's) teachers said ... I did not understand that choosing sciences would open up more opportunities for my daughter, but I stood my ground because I had my reasons. See, with sciences she would need extra help and I cannot afford tuition. I knew that at some point it was bound to become very difficult.

Nusrat was aware of her limited resources with five mouths to feed and futures to build. She earned just enough to support herself and her children and did not receive any assistance from her ex-husband. Her brothers helped at times, but she knew that her resources were insufficient to support an expensive education, so she chose to restrict options that would lead her daughter to a sense of deprivation in the future. She longed for them to have what they wanted but chose to silence this urge. She repeatedly used the term *shouq* (desire) to explain her aspirations for her daughters.

Despite these views, Nusrat's response to a certain type of education and to work in a non-feminised workplace for her daughters was always negative. While to the avid feminist this may seem self-surveilling but knowing Nusrat's story and her past life it is clear that this too is her strategy to save her daughters from the pain of unmet aspirations in the bigger scheme of things. This response points to how silence is sometimes employed in a conscious effort to self-impose constraints. Nusrat's story shows how *silences* are enacted as a corollary of the embodied experiences of agency as it functions alongside a dynamic structure. It is indeed paradoxical, at times emerging in acceptance of the social contract, other times in a refusal to remain oppressed and refuse choices for daughters that may empower them in the future. When we start reading this story holistically putting the various agency-structure interactions and the decisions alongside each other chronologically we see how Nusrat's own critical consciousness emerges-to evade present or future harm to her family.

## 6. 'We never lost sight of our shared targets': strategic silences

Tehmina's story shows us how *silences* are employed differently albeit powerfully to imagine and achieve alternate and better futures. Her life is testament of a consistent interplay of silence and voice to strategically move towards goals. These multiple negotiations between agency and structure over a life span reveal a strategy of *silences*.

I met Tehmina on a hot summer's day in the August of 2017. She spoke very calmly and deliberately. Tehmina had white hair and a face that showed signs of early ageing. After learning more about her, I found out that she was in her early 40s and had lived a hard life

of struggle. She was not at home when I visited, but her family invited me inside; they were very friendly.

Tehmina has eight children, six sons and two daughters. The eldest two are married now and they live with her. The family was not wealthy, but they lived well. Their house was of a good size, with an open courtyard. The floors were cemented, which was rare in that community. I learned that her older children, were earning for the family, which explained their prosperity. Tehmina's husband, Tariq, was known for his bad temper. Her children told me that their family was together, because of her and that she was able to deal with Tariq's temper. Tehmina soon joined us.

Oppression is visible in Tehmina's past. As a young child she lived with her uncle and laboured at the brick kilns she recalls, 'I have no memory of ever playing as a child'. Unfortunately, her adulthood was equally difficult. She told me about the time she was a bride. In silence, she lived with the family that did not appreciate her. Her son contracted a skin disease, but her in-laws would not allow him to be medically treated. In her refusal to accept this fate for her son she left her in-law's home and moving to her uncle's community with Tariq and her children. They lived with her uncle and when their son was cured moved from one place to another working at kilns, saving money to build a better future.

We see how Tehmina uses *silences* as a vehicle to enact her cultural capital by patiently planning for a future oriented cause. Tehmina's children admitted that she was their strength and the future planner. It was because of her careful money management, investments in micro-finance and systematic borrowing that they owned a house today. In choosing to disengage (silence) while re-engage (voice) at points she consistently followed her aspirations for her family. She invested in managing social networks, spending on local micro-credit initiatives until she had enough savings to buy land. It took her 25 years, but Tehmina had the patience (silence) and the ability (voice) to lead her family and keep working towards her goals that would ultimately give them stability. She also kept Tariq motivated to share her dream for the family. She said:

I had faith that my dreams will come true that Allah wills it for me but I have to work hard to reach my dreams ... I keep telling my children ... to keep working hard and have faith that things would work out ... Me and my husband remained united ... No matter how hard times were, even if we had to fight, we never lost sight of our shared targets. If we had less and could not eat enough, ***we would not complain or beg*** ... Sometimes my husband used to complain that people eat better, wear better but we never had enough. I used to make him understand that whatever we eat or wear has no value compared to what we can make of ourselves, if we save. So, he listened to me and agreed.

There is silence in *not complaining*, being patient and restraining oneself from buying, eating what one wants and doing what one pleases. At the same time, there is voice in continually working hard to save more. Using this strategic combination of silence and voice, Tehmina successfully built a better life in which her children could live well and have access to resources, including education. During the time when the family did not have a house, her elder six children had dropped out of school, but as soon as she was able to, she enrolled her youngest two daughters and the son in school. Beaming with pride she said, 'I am always grateful to God. My children have inherited the desire to learn and work hard'. Her original circumstances did not allow many opportunities for her children, including educational, but she worked hard to change her circumstances, 'I don't know whether they will have many opportunities in the future, but I have put

the younger ones in school. The older ones could not go as children and now their time has passed, but I want my younger one to study’.

Today, Tehmina does not have any living relatives, but she has the admiration of her children and their spouses. Her family has also earned the respect of her in-laws, something she never had before. Admiring Tehmina, one of her daughters-in-law said, ‘this house is united because of her. Our father-in-law is very short tempered ... The way that she keeps all of us together is something that our father-in-law may have never managed to do’. When she was vulnerable, with an ailing son and a lack of income, she assumed silence, waiting, reflecting and planning for a better future. She did not fight for family money. She knew that her financial situation and inability to contribute to the family would not help her cause. She silently built an alliance with her uncle, agreed to work with him at the brick kilns in her ancestral community, and quietly migrated there. Once her son was well enough, she had the freedom to relocate in search of better opportunities.

I have shown how *hearing silences* used strategically over a life course through the agency and its negotiations with structural constraints facilitates an understanding of women’s experiences of silence as paradoxical and *not necessarily submissive* – individuals, who may be reacting, but in ways that may not be understandable through a Western world-sense (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). This reflexive approach urges new questions to be asked. For example, why is it that Charlotte Bronte was appreciated for her work as being ahead of her own time? Bronte who depicted a strong, articulate, intelligent and opinionated female protagonist, who valued her own instincts and made decisions for herself. This depiction of a female was alien to Victorian England, where women were considered inferior to men with limited intelligence and sense of self. A *silences* hearing to Bronte’s works would have urged a researcher-hearer to ask different questions. Instead of assuming that she was ahead of her time, a *hearer* would ask, were there accomplices in the life span of Bronte who helped her to process these ideas? This question would have invited a different analysis of how women navigated agency and structure in Victorian times. Using a pseudonym to publish is another strategy of *silences* to navigate her agency in making herself heard. The aim of such a *silences* informed reflexivity should be to uncover new ways of interpreting research and creating knowledge.

## 7. Conclusion

I have argued for a critical approach and an inward-looking researcher, who actively engages in an effort to hear the lifelong *silences* through which women as mothers exercise their agency against structural constraints. I discuss that aspirations lead to agency which is often navigated in structures of constraint. Mothers disengage and re-engage with the structures in an attempt to transform the life conditions for their daughters. When analysed through a life course these sporadic episodes of agency-structure negotiation reveal a strategic use of *silences* through which they move towards their aspirations. Drawing on *silences* in this way shows that regardless of the ‘outcomes’ of their efforts they wield power in taking the reins of their life. This article addresses the researchers as hearers, urging them to question what they understand as epistemology so that non-western knowledges.

This call for recognising situated knowledges is another step in the direction of challenging ‘colonial structures of knowledge production’, a commitment that feminist and decolonising research has valued for a very long time (Manion and Shah 2019, 445). One of the ways in which this can be done is by challenging the silence/voice binary but also going beyond it to hear *silences* as a lifelong strategy. The silences hearing draws parallels with ‘reflective comparison’, a practice of critiquing one’s own position as a researcher (Unterhalter 2019). Opening to accept silences as a strategy of wielding power, invites epistemic revolutions which question one’s preconceived knowledge-meanings emerge in interactions with women, whom we see as situated knowers (also Uchendu, Griet, and Michel 2017). This fulfils the condition for testimonial justice, whereby we legitimise the value of the testimonies of these mothers as knowers. (Fricker 2003). A critical reflexive approach has been advocated to do the task of hearing as researchers mothers’ agency and power in structures of constraint are not interpreted as absent. This paper contributes to the silence literature by conceptualising silences as a lifelong strategy used by mothers explored through the relationship between agency and structural constraints at various points in their lives.

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