

2022

Media framing of marriage practices in Afghanistan

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Media Framing of Marriage Practices in Afghanistan

A Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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University of Northern Iowa

December 2022

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Abstract

Culturally, in Afghanistan, marriage is given much importance and seen as something that completes life. Through this study, I analyze how marriage practices, such as dowry (*Mahr*), bride price, and the “virginity ritual,” are described in newspapers and magazines of Afghanistan. In particular, I explore how the popular press, such as *8 Sobh* and *Khama Press* in Afghanistan frame their discussion of marriage practices. The findings from this analysis reveal that newspapers and magazines of Afghanistan frame marriage as an economic issue and a major focus of the articles is on the financial pressure on poor families due to the high cost of weddings. Whether or not bride price, dowry, and virginity ritual is a question of human rights, educational rights, women’s rights, or any other kind of right is hardly mentioned in these articles. The study also unearthed a lack of women’s voice in the way the popular press in Afghanistan frames their discussion of marriage practices. This lack of women’s voice limits the ability of audiences to form a more complete understanding about the serious impacts marriage rituals have on women.

This Study by: Hakima Afzaly

Entitled: Media Framing of Marriage Practices in Afghanistan

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and give my warmest thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Catherine H. Palczewski, who made this work possible. Starting my thesis coincided with the reemergence of the Taliban. Their reemergence did not only impact me emotionally but also impacted the feasibility of my field work. With all the changes to my research design, it seemed impossible for me to finish my thesis. However, Dr. Palczewski's thoughtful feedback and constant encouragement made it possible for me to finish writing this thesis. I do not have the right words to express my appreciation for their patience to always read my work closely and guide me throughout my thesis project.

I also thank my committee members, Dr. Emily Machen and Dr. Danielle McGeough for their remarks and insightful comments throughout this thesis. I could not have asked for better committee members for my thesis project.

I am very grateful for Dr. Wendy Hoofnagle and Staycie Lyman for their support and guidance throughout this journey.

Nino, without your support and friendship I would not have been able to spend a whole semester in Rod library. Thank you for being my writing companion and a wonderful friend. I will cherish our friendship forever.

Farishta, thank you for the constant love and support. Having you by my side at the last stage of my thesis is all I needed.

My Cedar Falls community, thank you for your kindness, care, and love. I will carry your love and kindness with me everywhere.

Lastly, to my family, especially my parents, thank you for encouraging me all along. Thank you for prioritizing my education. I really owe everything to my parents.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

To explain marriage and marriage practices in Afghanistan, two points need to be clarified. First, I use the term Afghanistani to refer to a native or inhabitant of Afghanistan, instead of using “Afghan” or “Afghani.” The reason is because Afghani is the currency of Afghanistan and the term *Afghan* is synonymous with the ethnonym “Pashtun,” which is the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Because my thesis is not focusing on any specific ethnic group, I use the term Afghanistani as a more inclusive term.

Second, Afghanistan is a large and diverse country, thus it needs to be specified whether a study is about the rural population or urban population of Afghanistan. In an assessment of Afghanistan completed in 2021, before the Taliban took over, Asey (2019) wrote that “Today, Afghanistan exists as two countries: the Afghanistan of the haves and the Afghanistan of the have-nots; one of the urban elites and one of the rural tribal chiefs; of conservative rural values and liberal, urban values.” Just 23.4% of Afghanistan’s population inhabit urban areas, and they are a more liberal population. The rest of Afghanistan’s population, which makes up more than 70% of the population, inhabits rural areas, and they are more traditional and conservative in their ideologies (Asey, 2019). To study marriage in Afghanistan requires a dual approach because practices vary between rural and urban areas.

This thesis focuses on the Afghanistani population in rural areas that still holds on to their traditional views. As a result of these traditions, girls are married off at a very young age; 60% of girls in these areas are already married by the time they reach the age of 16 (“Providing Educational, Economic and Health Care Assistance to Afghan Families,” 2016). According to women activists, in rural areas of Afghanistan, almost 80 percent of marriages are either arranged or forced. Most girls

in these areas are married off to men who are twice or thrice older than the girls (“Providing Educational,” 2016).

In Afghanistan, marriage is considered essential and as something that completes life. It is common to hear from people of Afghanistan that “Without marriage, life and faith are incomplete” (Khinjani, 2012, p. 20). While this belief about marriage is widespread in all parts of Afghanistan, people in rural areas follow it more strictly given their conservative and traditional lifestyle. That is why parents are in constant search of suitable partners for their sons and daughters.

Islam does not encourage celibacy. In fact, Islam states that the followers of Islam have legal rights to have sexual pleasure (Farahani, 2008, p. 188). However, sexual intimacy is only permitted within marriage and sexual activity outside of marriage is considered illicit sex. It is considered adultery (*Zena*) that results in punishment (Farahani, 2008, p. 188). This is another reason why marriage is essential among the Afghanistani population, who are predominantly Muslims. Most parents in Afghanistan try to get their sons and daughters married as soon as they can, so they do not get involved in any illicit sex. Unfortunately, several practices and beliefs attached to marriage violate Afghanistani women’s rights and undermine their happiness, but these practices and beliefs often continue unquestioned.

In my thesis, I want to analyze how marriage practices, such as dowry, bride price, and the “virginity ritual” are described in newspapers and magazines of Afghanistan. In particular, I seek to explore how the popular press in Afghanistan frames their discussion of marriage practices, such as bride price, dowry, and virginity ritual. As part of this analysis, I note that there is a lack of women’s voice in the way the popular press in Afghanistan frames their discussion of marriage practices. This

lack of women's voice limits the ability of audiences to form a more complete understanding about the serious impacts marriage rituals have on women.

To introduce this thesis, I first describe sex roles in Afghanistan before turning to marriage in Afghanistan. I then preview marriage practices considered for this study, and close by providing a summary of the chapters that follow.

Gender Roles in Afghanistan

Gender roles in Afghanistan are highly patriarchal. Even though the population of Afghanistan is composed of a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups who have their own customs and traditions, including different traditions for marriage, groups share an attitude towards gender/sex roles: Patriarchy is dominant in all of these groups and men are viewed as the superior gender (Emadi, 2002, p. 29).

According to Afghanistan's gender/sex roles, specific characteristics define men and women. For example, one of the characteristics used to define a man is *banamus*, a term used to signify the ability of a man who can discipline women in his family (Emadi, 2002, p. 30). One of the characteristics to define a woman is *bahaya*, which literally means modest; it is mainly known as a term used for women who are obedient and submissive to men (Emadi, 2002, p. 30).

Women and men are expected to obey certain codes of conduct from an early age. Codes of conduct are not written documents. They are understood and widely accepted by everyone. In fact, these codes are passed on from one generation to another. This explains how gender roles in Afghanistan have been assigned to men and women through communication for generations. Through Afghanistan's tribal code of conduct, men and women are defined with specific characteristics. For example, girls are taught to always be modest, obey men, and never do anything against family or society's will. Male members of the family are given the power to

control women and even act violently if women disgrace the family (Safi & Ahmad, 2014, p. 35).

In Afghanistan, men are usually the income earners in a family and women are mainly expected to take care of household responsibilities. Thus, boys are regarded as economic assets. Parents invest in their sons' health and education, so they can provide for their parents in the future when the parents get old (Khinjani, 2012, p. 20). Girls, on the other hand, are assigned to do the household chores, and they do not earn money. In rural areas, 80% of women are illiterate and do not have any formal education (Leighton, 2015). Because they cannot work outside of the home and earn, they cannot make any financial contribution to their families. Hence, girls are considered an economic burden, which is why girls are often married off at an early age.

Afghanistan is one of the many countries that does not recognize homosexuality culturally or legally, maintains a rigid gender binary, and where heteronormativity is dominant (Khinjani, 2012, p. 29). That is why my thesis focuses on marriage between the two sexes that Afghanistani society recognizes: men and women.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler argued that “one does not do one's gender alone. One is always doing with or for another” (as cited in Deutsch, 2007, p. 107). As we see in the culture of Afghanistan, women and men and their roles are defined based on their relationship with each other. The press is a powerful tool through which society “does gender together.”

What is Marriage in the Context of Afghanistan

It is a challenge to find accurate statistics on marriage in Afghanistan for two main reasons. First, when people in Afghanistan get married, they do not register it

with the state. Second, many people in Afghanistan do not have a birth certificate, so their age is usually an approximation (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p. 5). Therefore, with the lack of birth certificates and the approximation of age, any data created on marriage statistics cannot be reliable. Nevertheless, some agencies like UNICEF have attempted to collect some data about marriage in Afghanistan. UNICEF has found out that 57% of girls in Afghanistan marry before age 19, but UNICEF does not make it clear from which year is this figure obtained from (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p. 5).

Another challenge to find accurate statistics on marriage in Afghanistan is that civil law, customary law, and Shariah law in Afghanistan do not set the same marriage age. For example, if we just focus on females in Afghanistan, according to Afghanistan's civil law, the minimum marriage age for females is 16, but it allows a father to marry his daughter off earlier if he wishes to (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p. 2). Customary practices allow marriage at earlier ages (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p. 2). According to Shariah law, the minimum marriage age for females is 15, but Shariah law also allows any age of marriage as long as there is adulthood and sanity between the two parties who are getting married (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p. 14). However, as some Islamic scholars argue, there are no fixed definitions of adulthood and sanity (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p. 14).

Apart from the controversy on marriage age, the importance put on marriage for the majority of people in Afghanistan is the same. That is why parents are in constant search of suitable partners for their sons and daughters. The expectation is that everyone marries, and parents make a huge fuss over their sons and daughters refusing to get married.

The Process of Marriage Proposal

Unfortunately, several practices and beliefs attached to marriage violate Afghanistani women's rights and undermine their happiness, but these practices and beliefs continue. Fazl Muzhary, in their article, "The Bride Price: The Afghan Tradition of Paying for Wives," states that nearly all weddings in Afghanistan begin with matchmaking. The family of the groom initiates the proposal and waits until the bride's family accepts the proposal. It is considered shameful if the family of the bride initiates the proposal (Muzhary, 2016).

As soon as the bride's family gives approval for the marriage, the actual negotiations about the wedding take place (Muzhary, 2016). A larger part of negotiation surrounds the marriage related practices, such as the bride price and dowry. The rest of the negotiation is about the wedding costs, including food and catering.

In the wedding and the bride price negotiations, the bride plays very little to almost no role. She is expected to accept what her family decides (Muzhary, 2016). Usually, the male heads of the two families conduct the negotiations (Muzhary, 2016). It is also usually the male head of the family from the bride's side that determines the amount of the bride price and amount of dowry (Muzhary, 2016).

Once the negotiation is completed, a male representative from the bride's side receives the bride price in the form of cash, gold, land, cars, domesticated animals, and household goods (Muzhary, 2016). The wedding cost negotiation usually happens quite fast. However, the negotiations about the bride price and dowry are what take longer and often several sessions of negotiations.

The absence and passive role of bride in the process of marriage proposal and bride price negotiations is an indication of the patriarchal nature of Afghanistani

culture where a woman is denied her autonomy to be present in the bride price negotiations and have a say in it. Perhaps, some brides do not want to have the bride price practice, or some might not be happy with the decided price in their absence. Not only is a woman denied autonomy to have a say in her marriage proposal, but she is also treated as an object owned by her male head of the family before marriage and then gets sold to and owned by her husband's head of the family after marriage. Basically, it is men who do the negotiations and get the benefit while women play no role, receive no benefits, and have no say.

Marriage Rituals in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a highly patriarchal and traditional society. Marriage rituals, such as dowry, bride price, and the "virginity ritual" especially, are not as openly discussed as they are in other countries. Thus, I describe marriage rituals not only based on the existing scholarship on Afghanistan but also based on other places like Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia, India, and South Africa because these countries either share the same religion with Afghanistan or have cultural ties with Afghanistan. To understand media coverage of marriage, a general understanding of the detrimental impacts that marriage practices have on the lives of women is necessary.

According to Asif et al. (2020), in third world countries like Afghanistan, one of the biggest sources of physical and mental suffering for women is marriage. In the name of marriage, women in third world countries are sold, exchanged, and used to resolve disputes. Their study examines Khaled Hosseini's novels, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which depicts the miserable lives of married women in Afghanistan. According to their analysis, the misery of female characters in Khaled Hosseini's novels reflects the misery of Afghanistani women in real life (Asif et al.,

2020). There are three marriage rituals that contribute to this misery: bride price, dowry, and virginity rituals.

Bride Price

Bride price is “the money paid by the groom’s family for the bride to her family” (Muzhary, 2016). It is a cultural practice with no basis in Islamic Sharia law (Muzhary, 2016). The bride price is often seen as a very important source of income for the brides’ families, especially for the poorer ones. It is noteworthy to mention at this point that there is not just one fixed way the practice of bride price takes place. It varies wedding to wedding, family to family, and even girl to girl. Some poor families view bride price as a source of income and tend to approve marriage based on the amount of bride price they will receive instead of focusing on whether the potential groom is a good fit for their daughter based on his personality (Muzhary, 2016). There have also been cases where some parents, especially fathers, forced their daughters into marriages just because the bride price was negotiated to a higher price and the bride’s family had a loan to pay.

For example, a 20-year-old woman from Afghanistan named Sapida (a pseudonym) was forced by her father to get engaged to an old man. In return, her father received \$10,000 USD from an old man as a form of bride price. Sapida explained:

I am being forced to marry a 60-year-old man. My father beat me until I agreed, and then he beat me again until I stopped crying in front of my fiancé’s relatives. He has sold me, and I do not know what to do! (as cited in Sapai & Omaryar, 2009).

With the money paid for Sapida, her father bought a car and leased an apartment. Sapida did not see her engagement as a joyful event. She wanted to commit suicide.

According to Smith, the practice of bride-price can also encourage violence against women. Bride prices often are large amounts of money. Poor families that have considerable debts may be forced to marry off their daughters so they can use bride price to pay off their debts. Smith also argued that paying bride price fuels the belief that a woman is her husband's property, and he can do whatever he wants to. That is why men who pay a higher bride price often allow themselves to be more violent (Smith, 2009). There is a famous saying ("*Da zar kharidim da sang mekoshim*") in the rural provinces of Afghanistan which literally means that we bought you with money and will kill you with a stone. Bride price can also trigger forced marriage because the money received in the form of bride price is a great source of income for poor families.

The practice of bride price does not have any legal framework because there is no explicit mention of this practice in the present marriage law of Afghanistan. To the contrary, the marriage laws of 1960, 1971, and 1977, prohibit the practice under Decree no. 7 of 1978 (Martin, 2018, p. 12). The conservative groups of Afghanistani society, however, did not accept the decree. Therefore, the decree was implemented unevenly (Martin, 2018, p. 12).

Dowry (mahr)

In the culture of Afghanistan, women who get married will receive a dowry. The amount for dowry gets fixed during the wedding negotiations, but it is only paid to a woman in the future if her husband divorces her (Asif et al., 2020).

Mahr is meant to provide security for a woman and her children after a divorce. Dowry (*mahr*) is the only payment allowed by the Islamic Sharia law in marriage. Dowry is different from bride price because the bride price is the sum

which is paid to a woman's parents before marriage while dowry is the sum a woman will receive after marriage (Asif et al., 2020).

One of the main reasons behind the high levels of violence within marriage in South Asia is dowry. Scholars argue that dowry-related violence sometimes leads to death among young married women (Solotaroff & Pande, 2014). There are different forms of dowry-related violence, physical violence being the most prevalent form. In India, Pakistan, and Nepal, dowry violence can take the form of harassment that often results in young married women committing suicide (Solotaroff & Pande, 2014).

Virginity Ritual

Another marriage practice in Afghanistan is the requirement of the so-called "virgin" female body as the potential bride and conducting a "virginity ritual" the night of the wedding.

The virginity ritual is something that is not explicitly talked about during the marriage negotiations but is considered to be one of the most important marriage rituals. A potential groom's family expects that the bride they want to choose for their son must be a virgin. Virginity is considered a symbol of purity (Indug, 2018). Virgin women are also viewed as pure (*pakdaman*) (Indug, 2018). This attribute is particularly used to distinguish girls (unmarried) who are not involved in any kind of sexual misconduct from girls who are involved in such behavior (Indug, 2018). That is why a girl's virginity is very important, and it is greatly desired (Indug, 2018). It is expected of women in Afghanistan to maintain their virginity until their marriage, and they are subject to severe punishments if it is found out that they have any pre-marital sexual experience (Indug, 2018).

The virginity ritual takes place after a woman's *Zhafaf* (wedding night) where she is expected to bleed to prove her virginity (Indug, 2018). Following the first night

after a woman's wedding, the groom's family checks the bedsheets to see if intercourse the previous evening resulted in the woman's hymen tearing and bleeding. Failure to find blood stains can be used as "evidence" of a woman's transgression, and the resulting punishment can be severe and life threatening for the woman. In these cases, the groom's family may insist that the woman must be sent for a virginity test. In most cases, if the bride's virginity cannot be verified, she is divorced right away (Indug, 2018).

Virginity testing is happening in at least 20 countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Jordan, Libya, Malawi, Morocco, Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Turkey, United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and Zimbabwe (World Health Organization, 2018, p. 7). According to the World Health Organization, virginity testing does not have any scientific or medical basis because the anatomy of hymen differs from person to person. In fact, there is no one exact anatomy for a hymen which proves the false basis of virginity/hymen examination (World Health Organization, 2018, p. 6). Thus, hymen is an assumed indicator of virginity, not the actual indicator.

Despite the lack of medical credibility for the hymen test, many women around the world are still subjected to it. According to Soumaya Naamane Guessous, who is an expert on studies related to women's sexuality in Morocco, Moroccan women and girls have to undergo this test before their wedding, often at the request of the female's own family or her future in-laws. A test result indicating a girl is not a virgin can be deadly. Women are sometimes killed by their own families or commit suicide. The honor of the family is associated with female virginity and this is deeply rooted in the social norms that control women's body and sexuality (Ouzzani, 2018). Similarly, Zavieh and Mona, Iranian feminists, conducted a study on Iranian women

living in Montreal. They argued that the virginity imperative is a mechanism to police, monitor, and classify women's bodies as desirable or undesirable, appropriate for marriage or available for sex (Zavieh & Mona, 2017).

Farideh Khalaj Abadi Farahani, an Iranian researcher, conducted a qualitative study in Tehran in 2008. They had selected 1743 female students from four multidisciplinary universities. All of the students were undergraduates. Farahani's study revealed a sexual double-standards in the Iranian culture where men are granted sexual license while women are sexually restricted. It is this sexual double-standards that gives men the freedom to choose a virgin wife. That is why relationships with a history of premarital sex are less likely to lead to marriage (Farahani, 2008). Cuong Manh La, a researcher from Vietnam, examined the social and cultural relationship between masculinity and virginity. His study found that marrying a virgin helped men enhance their social reputation and masculinity (La, 2005).

Conclusion

To conduct my own analysis of marriage practices in Afghanistan, I next provide a literature review of the scholarly conversations on the role of media framing on different topics, including marriage and marriage rituals, and then situate Afghanistan's media within these scholarly discussions. In chapter three, I describe my research method used in this study. In chapter four, I analyze the content of news articles and present the findings. The final chapter offers conclusions based on this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Following from the background context of marriage and marriage rituals in Afghanistan in the previous chapter, this chapter provides a literature review of the scholarly conversations on the role of media framing on different topics including marriage and marriage rituals. I then situate Afghanistan's media within these scholarly discussions. I begin this chapter by explaining the history of journalism and the role of media in Afghanistan. This review is limited to history before the Taliban takeover in 2021, which drastically altered the status of the press. Second, I explain marriage as a rite of passage. Third, I explain media framing and the influence of media framing. Fourth, I delve into existing research about how marriage and marriage practices are portrayed in media coverage. Finally, I point out a gap in the existing studies done on media coverage of Afghanistan's marriage practice.

History and Role of Media in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's history of journalism is more than a hundred years old. Saed Jamaludin Afghan, a political activist and Islamic ideologist, started the first newspaper publication in Afghanistan in 1873 called *Shamsulnehar* (Mangal, 2020, p. 5822). This periodical, published between 40-48 issues. The second periodical, *Seraj-ulakhbar*, was printed in 1906 (Mangal, 2020, p. 5822). *Seraj-ul-akhbar's* publications argued against colonialism and were critical of Afghanistan's friendship with the United Kingdom. That is why its publication stopped after the first issue and resumed in 1911 (Mangal, 2020, p. 5822).

Afghanistan experimented with its first independent media sector in the late 1940s and its second in 1964. This was also the year that the Constitution of Afghanistan was ratified (Mangal, 2020, p. 5823). The constitution stated that "every Afghan has the right to express his thoughts in speech, in writing, in pictures, and by

other means, in accordance with the provisions of the law” (Mangal, 2020, p. 5823). The constitution also stated that “everyone in Afghanistan has the right to print and publish ideas in accordance with the law without prior screening by state authorities” (Mangal, 2020, p. 5823). Nevertheless, a year later, the government decided to regulate the media sector and prohibited two specific matters: obscenity and any defamation to the king or the principles of Islam (Mangal, 2020, p. 5823).

In spite of these limitations, journalism in Afghanistan continued developing until it fell under the control of Soviets during the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and eventually faced a complete shutdown when the Taliban emerged in 1996 (Mangal, 2020, p. 5823). In 2002, a relatively free diverse media developed in Afghanistan (Mangal, 2020, p. 5823). Since then, hundreds of print and electronic media outlets have been established (Mangal, 2020, p. 5823). In 2010, for instance, there were more than 175 FM radio stations, 75 TV channels, four news agencies, and hundreds of publications, including at least seven daily newspapers (Cary, 2012, p. 4).

However, despite the enormous number of publications available, there are some barriers to robust media in Afghanistan. First, the literacy rate is low, at only 43% (Cary, 2012, p. 4). According to a survey prepared by Altai Consulting in 2010 of 1,500 individuals from Afghanistan to find out how they consume media, only 13% of the participants said they read print periodicals on a regular basis (Cary, 2012, p. 4). Second, Mina Saboor (2015) identified other non-constitution based barriers to free media in Afghanistan: political barriers, barriers due to insecurity, and intervention of religious figures.

The unique political structure of Afghanistan, which includes a President and a Chief Executive Officer, as well as the Taliban’s continuous presence at all levels of

authority, has heightened competition among diverse leaders and factions for popular support and influence. That is why influential power holders impose their personal political objectives on journalists, limiting the practice of free and democratic journalism in Afghanistan (Saboor, 2015, p. 4).

Another terrible fact of journalism in Afghanistan is that journalists confront significant security challenges. While the security risks for journalists in conflict zones are obvious, journalists in Afghanistan have been facing a relatively higher risk (Saboor, 2015, p. 4). In 2015, Human Rights Watch published a study detailing growing violence against journalists in Afghanistan by both state and non-state actors. The study also stated that the government of Afghanistan has failed to prosecute those responsible for violence against Afghanistani journalists (Saboor, 2015, p. 4). The Taliban insurgency contributes significantly to journalists' fear of insecurity. For example, throughout 2014, journalists were attacked several times and they were warned to stop their journalism because their journalism was seen as promotion of "western values" (Saboor, 2015, p. 4).

Finally, intervention of religious figures causes further barriers in Afghanistan's media. The reason behind that is that the tenets and provisions of Islamic ideology carry more weight than state laws in Afghanistan (Saboor, 2015, p. 4). Article 3 of the Constitution states: "No law shall infringe the doctrines and provisions of Afghanistan's holy faith of Islam" (Saboor, 2015, p. 4). That is why religious scholars often interfere and evaluate whether media content is Islamic or not, which leads to further media censorship and regulation (Saboor, 2015, p. 4). However, what constitutes Islamic or non-Islamic media content is controversial because there is no clear definition for it. This lack of a clear definition for what

constitutes Islamic or non-Islamic media content may lead some reporters to take advantage of this ambiguity and create their framing accordingly.

Joran Hok agreed with Saboor and emphasized that media freedom in Afghanistan is limited. He stated that “Afghanistan’s constitution allows media freedom but, in reality, this is heavily curtailed” (Hok, 2015, p. 677). Hok further added that Afghanistan’s legislation limits freedom of expression, particularly in areas related to criticism of Islam and defamation of specific persons (Hok, 2015, p. 677). A report was prepared in 2015 by the reputable Freedom House to grade Afghanistan’s media. According to their grading, Afghanistani media is “not free” (as cited in Hok, 2015, p. 677).

Despite these limits, study of media is still important because, after the collapse of the Taliban, media were considered as an important tool for nation building. That is why, in a post-Taliban era, a huge amount of financial support was allocated to rebuild Afghanistan’s media system. For example, over \$166 million was reportedly spent by USAID and the Department of State in the ten years following the Taliban's regime collapse in order to promote independent media in Afghanistan (Calderone, 2013, as cited in Hatef & Cooke, 2020, p. 116). Through financial investment in Afghanistan’s media, USAID’s goal and hope was that media would help “produce an enhanced civil society engagement on democracy and governance in Afghanistan” (Afghanistan Media Development, 2013, as cited in Hatef & Cooke, 2020, p. 116). USAID’s goal was to improve access to information and education, as well as to encourage debate and conversation between citizens and government officials (Hatef & Cooke, 2020, p.116).

In countries where literacy rate is high, people are less likely to solely rely on the media. Instead, they also do their own research and their own deep studies. On the

contrary, in countries like Afghanistan where literacy rate is low, people are more likely to rely on the media and get more influenced by what they hear from the media because they do not have deep studies or research of themselves. That is why media study is important in Afghanistan.

Rites of Passage

Marriage is a rite of passage because, through marriage, an individual leaves one phase of life and enters another stage of life. According to Van Gennep (1960), in any civilization an individual's life is a series of transitions from one age to the next and from one occupation to the next. These transitions start from an individual's birth and end with their death. Transitions are usually accompanied by special acts, and for different cultures these special acts take the form of ceremonies in order to validate these rights of passage.

Although the content of ceremonies varies from culture to culture, the pattern of ceremonies is universal. Meaning, all cultures have ceremonies to celebrate birth, coming of age, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, parenthood, job promotion, and death. For each of these occasions, there are rituals whose primary goal is to enable the individual to transition from one defined position to another equally well-defined position (Gennep, 1960, p. 3).

Gennep outlined a pattern of three main phases of rites of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. In the separation phase, an individual or group gets removed from a former state. In the transition phase, an individual or group communicates and forms a close bond with other members of the group. Finally, in the incorporation phase, an individual or group gets reintegrated into society, but in a new state (Gennep, 1960, p. 3).

Media plays an important role in how marriage and marriage rituals are taught and upheld and the way media chooses to frame their discussion surrounding these topics can impact people's understanding of these practices. For example, the media may frame marriage as an economic arrangement, as a romantic arrangement, or as a religious mandate, just to name a few.

Media Framing

Media framing plays a significant role in conveying information. Media framing impacts what ideas enter the social atmosphere that people have to choose from as they decide what to believe and how to live. Media framing has the power to shape audiences' perception of a topic, form audiences' opinions in regards to what is important and what is not, or what is a problem and what is not, and even limit audiences' access to the full picture of a topic. The following set of literature indicates the significance of media framing when conveying information.

Framing helps people make sense of the world around them. Goffman (1974) introduced the concept of *frame* in order to explain how people tend to use frames for the purpose of identifying and labeling information, which will then help them make sense of the world around them. Gitlin (1980) went along the same line with Goffman in defining frames. In fact, Gitlin (1980) provided further meaning to the concept of framing by stating that the reason why people tend to frame is because it will help them comprehend, negotiate, and manage reality and even choose "appropriate repertoires of cognition and action" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6). In other words, information alone does not make any sense. Instead, information needs to be put into relationship with other information and with context. Framing is one way we make sense of information because framing does the job of putting one bit of information in relation to another. Basically, frames tell us what information matters and how different

information fits together. The way news stories frame a topic, whether it is an event or people, influences audiences' perception of the topic.

For example, media framing has the power to change the perpetrator into a victim and vice versa depending on the words selected to frame a story. According to W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman, "the who, what, where, why, how, and when . . . give acts and events a narrative frame. A choice among alternative settings or among origins of a political development also determines who are virtuous, who are threats to the good life, and which courses of action are effective solutions" (as cited in Martin, 2004, p. 7). Likewise, if media frames its discussion on dowry and reports that dowry has increased twice compared to last year and as a result, a certain number of men have attempted to commit suicide due the financial pressure, this kind of framing makes the reader think that men are the victims of dowry and their health is important. This kind of framing, thus, ignores the intensity of violence women face due to dowry-related violence.

Entman (1993) stated that the communicator, the receiver, the text, and the culture are four locations of the communication process. Put differently, Entman's purpose was to explain that frames play an important role in how information is communicated, received, comprehended, and even acted upon. Entman (1993) also made an explicit remark on the significant role of framing in media studies by stating that "The frame in a news text is really the imprint of power – it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text" (p. 55). For example, some researchers in the critical studies tradition argue that media frames often represent the position of those in power in American society by constantly framing in favor of deeply entrenched values, such as patriarchy, capitalism, White privilege, heterosexism, individualism, and consumerism (Budd, Craig, & Steinman, 1999, as

cited in Entman, 2007, p. 163). Knight (1999) agreed with Entman on the connection framing has with power. Knight further argued that frames are powerful devices in media because they help define, solve, and form public opinion.

Audiences' perception of a topic is not only influenced by how the story is framed but also by the manner in which a topic is presented. Christopher R. Martin (2004) argued that news stories, like any good narrative, can be entertaining, and the manner the story is conveyed can influence how the audience understands and experiences the story in a particular way (Martin, 2004, p. 8). Martin studied labor and the corporate media in the United States. He argued that since the early 1990s, news media have framed key issues of labor as "consumer" issues and, by doing so, media have ignored the actual concerns of the union workforce. Martin's analyzed how media framing has shifted the focus from concerns of the union workforce to consumer's issue.

Media framing can impact topics like marriage and marriage rituals as well. Because marriage is a social institution that can be understood as a legal agreement, a family relationship, a ritual, or a rite of passage, the way the media frame marriage has a direct impact on the audience and their understanding of marriage.

For example, if media frame its discussion on virginity ritual as part of marriage, ties this ritual with religion, and emphasizes that virginity rituals are important because Islam prohibits premarital sex and a virginity ritual guarantees that women do not become involved in premarital sex, this kind of framing prevents the audience from understanding that virginity is a myth and the ritual lacks scientific basis. It is, therefore, discriminatory to women. Instead, audiences form their understanding of virginity rituals as an important religious requirement.

Media framing impacts audiences' access to the full picture of an event or a practice reported in the news. James Carey, media historian, described news as drama, not information, because according to Carey news does not give a description of the universe, but rather a depiction of a dramatic force and action (cited in Martin, 2004, p. 8). Carey's notion of news as drama applies to media framing of marriage rituals as well. For example, media may frame its discussion of the practice of bride price and report many men are still single in Afghanistan because they cannot afford the bride price. This kind of framing puts all the importance on men's marital status and prevents audiences understanding that some families in Afghanistan marry off their daughters to men twice their age, just to get the bride price in return.

In short, considering these scholarly discussions and the examples mentioned above, it can be concluded that framing is an important tool in media and what the audiences get and comprehend from media is impacted by how the information is framed and in what manner it is presented. Framing often serves those in power. Framing can make the audience view a perpetrator as a victim or vice versa. Framing can limit the audience perception of a topic's full picture. Framing can even impact what lens the audience should use to view a topic, a religious lens for instance. Basically, if the audiences view something as more important or less important, it is due to the media framing.

Examples of Media Framing

Scholars have used framing theory to explain how media make sense of events, such as protest, social reality, marriage rituals, and gay marriage. Media coverage of a protest can shift the focus from a critique of systems of sexism to women's personal problems. Media framing can present homosexuality as a sin if homosexuality is presented through its connection with religion. Media framing can

present same sex marriage as a human issue if media focus on the sentiment of LGBTQ community. I now explore these examples to clarify how framing affects perception.

In 1968, a group of women protested in Atlantic City against the Miss America pageant. The protest received extensive media attention. Bonnie J. Dow (2003) explored media coverage of this protest. Dow's analysis concluded that media coverage framed the protest as an example of women's personal problems, not as a critique of systems of sexism. Media stories adopted the frame that women protested because they were not pretty. Sexism and women's appearance are two completely different topics, yet the way the media had framed the protest enabled audiences to shift focus from sexism and to instead focus on feminists' appearance.

Media framing also impacts people's attitudes and their acceptance of social realities. Alex Jacobi (2016) studied Christian media framing of gay marriage. Using a mixed method, Jacobi focused on a sample of articles from 2010 to 2015 from *Christianity Today's* website. Their findings indicated that a majority of the articles did not approve of gay marriage and they expressed their disapproval frankly. The rest of the articles showed approval for the human beings to have love and grace, but they still subtly implied that homosexuality in their view was a sin. The framing of "gays vs. religion" was used in these articles. This study indicated that the bottom line of each news article was that homosexuality is a sin and this conclusion was made because homosexuality was presented through its relation with religion. Had the news articles used a different frame, such as "gay vs. right to sexuality" the bottom line would have been different, such as every individual having the right to choose their sexuality. With this frame, the message conveyed to audiences would also be freedom of sexuality, instead of focus on what it means to be gay from a religious approach.

Another study analyzed newspaper articles that had used a different frame for homosexuality. Rodriguez and Blumell (2014) examined how a U.S newspaper framed topics surrounding same-sex marriage. The authors focused on the articles of *The New York Times* and used a qualitative content analysis to assess the quotes used in the articles. Their findings showed that there is a lack of human-interest perspective in the way media frames topics about same sex marriage. This study indicated that if media framing is humanized and the news coverage puts a major focus on the voices and sentiment of LGBTQ community, the readers will get a more complete understanding of same-sex marriage and understand that it is not just a legal issue, but a human issue.

The studies above depict that media framing of different topics, such as protest, gay people, and gay marriage, created different meanings of these topics. Similarly, depending on whether news coverage of marriage practices in Afghanistan focus on the voices of women affected by the marriage rituals or men, the audience will get a more complete understanding of the serious implications of marriage rituals on women.

Media Portrayal of Marriage Rituals

This section aims to examine studies done about media in some of the Asian countries (e.g., India, Pakistan, and China) in order to clarify how when discussing marriage, media framing does not center on marriage rituals or women.

Some of the news articles in India frame their discussion on dowry in a way that focuses more on the crime aspect than on dowry as a serious societal issue. Harpreet Singh (2011) chose a sample of 34 news articles from two Indian newspapers, *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, and analyzed their contents. Singh wanted to find out how the newspapers presented dowry-related violence and dowry

itself. Their findings indicated that only 13% of the news articles were in-depth stories that looked at dowry in relation to other social issues in Indian society. The rest of the articles, which made 83 percent of the articles, focused on the crime aspect of dowry-related violence. In these stories, the reporters went over the crime in greater detail, focusing on the victims, the location and nature of the crime, the people involved, and the role of the police. This study indicated that news media do not always take major societal issues like dowry seriously. If news articles framed dowry in a way that had more focus on dowry and less focus on the crime aspect of it, the impact on politicians and the general public would be different. Thus, media framing impacts the seriousness of societal issues like dowry.

In this particular study, media framing impacted the seriousness of dowry in two ways. First, by focusing on crime, the media made it seem like crime was the issue, and that dowry would be an acceptable practice if people did not commit crimes. Second, the stories detach the crime from dowry and make it seem like dowry was not the cause of the crime, but the criminal people were the cause.

If topics like marriage rituals do not help commercial media with their marketability, media tend not to even cover such topics. Porismita Borah (2008) analyzed the contents of a sample of 4058 articles about dowry in India. Borah concluded that typically newspapers look for stories that have a higher marketability. One of the journalists interviewed for this study had stated that “people do not like to read about dowry related stories, which they consider as reflecting the ‘ugly truth’ about Indian society” (Borah, 2008, p. 390). Borah’s study and the journalist’s statement indicated that because topics like dowry do not have a high marketability, media will either go after topics with higher marketability or frame their discussion of

dowry in a way that is appealing to the reader. Thus, news stories do not cover the social reality of dowry and its impacts.

Higher marketability is also an incentive for commercial media to be selective of what women-related issues to cover. Adnan Malik et al. (2019) conducted a study in Pakistan in order to examine representation of women in print and electronic media. Their study focused on finding out which women-related issues are given more importance by Pakistani media and how media represents women's issues. The result depicted that Pakistani media give more importance to women's political matters as compared to other issues related to women. Basically the result depicted that the media cover women politicians or elections, but it does not cover issues related to the daily lives (marriage, family, etc.) of most women.

Gap in the Literature

Missing in this literature is Afghanistani media's discussion of marriage rituals and how media in Afghanistan portray marriage practices. Although much is known about what marriage practices exist and how they are woven into the culture, no research analyzes how the popular press in Afghanistan frames their discussion of marriage practices and whether or not news stories in Afghanistan reflect the social reality of marriage practices and their impacts. That is why, for my research, I want to examine the popular press in Afghanistan. My research will contribute to earlier research on marriage practices by providing updated information about marriage discussions that recently appeared in newspapers and magazines of Afghanistan. In particular, I want to discover if women and marriage rituals are the direct focus of the media in Afghanistan. I also want to explore how marriage and marriage rituals are explained and upheld through newspapers and magazines of Afghanistan. Basically,

my research question is: How does the popular press in Afghanistan frame their discussion of marriage practices, such as bride price, dowry, and virginity ritual?

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Following from the literature review in the previous chapter, this chapter explains the research approach used in this study. Specifically, it provides detailed information about the research type, data collection techniques, and data analysis approaches used in this study. The research used a qualitative media-framing analysis in order to make sense of some of the newspaper and magazine articles about marriage practices in Afghanistan.

What Data Was Gathered

Initially, I wanted to do ethnographic research and interview women from different provinces of Afghanistan. However, writing my thesis coincided with the reemergence of the Taliban. That is why the entire Afghanistani population were busy fleeing the country and they were emotionally not ready to be interviewed. I had to change my research design and method from conducting interviews to studying available data. Studying media was one of the few feasible options considering the circumstances of Afghanistan at the time and all the chaos in the country due to the reemergence of the Taliban.

Data for this study were collected from online sources that have been digitized. These sources include articles and magazines from news outlets based in Afghanistan. These news outlets are *8 Sobh* and *Khaama Press*.

I selected these two news outlets for three reasons. First, after doing a preliminary search, these two news outlets had relatively more articles that addressed marriage rituals in more detail than other news outlets. Second, because I intend to provide a current perspective of marriage practices in Afghanistan, I looked for newspapers and magazines that were established in recent years. *8 Sobh* was established in 2007 and *Khama Press* was established in 2010. Third, to enrich my

findings, I looked for sources that have readers from across Afghanistan. I selected these sources because they deliver information in both of Afghanistan's official languages, Pashto and Farsi (Persian), as well as in English. Additionally, having these newspapers and magazines available in English is helpful given this is an English-language thesis. While these two news outlets do not specify who their primary audience is, it is easy to assume that the Afghanistani population in urban areas are more likely to be consumers of the texts because they are literate.

To provide a current perspective on marriage practices in Afghanistan, I initially wanted to focus just on the last couple of years. However, after doing a preliminary search, I found out that focusing just on three to five recent years did not produce many articles to analyze. However, if the focus is extended to at least ten years, the outlets have published around 31 articles on marriage. That is why I focus on the last ten years.

I should also mention that I selected articles and magazines published between 2010 to August 2021. The reason why the time frame is limited to before August 2021 is because in August 2021 the Taliban took over Afghanistan once again. With the re-emergence of the Taliban, most journalists fled the country and their publications stopped.

How Data Were Gathered

Article collection was conducted between January 2022 to February 2022. All the articles about marriage and marriage rituals were retrieved from the online news database of each newspaper using search terms such as *marriage*, *bride price*, *dowry*, *virginity ritual*, and *woman*. A search with the Farsi translation (عروسی, طویانه, شیربها,) (بکارت گله, مهریه, ازدواج, زن) was also done just to make sure any relevant news article was not left out.

In total, I found 31 articles from the two publications. One had 19 articles and the other had 12 articles that reported about either bride price, dowry, or virginity rituals. I printed out all the news articles in case the online news database faced some technical issues, which is quite common with Afghanistan's online databases.

I then coded the articles in order to make sense and organize the data. The coding was based on what frames the articles share. To identify the frames used by the media outlets, I looked into how marriage is described, and what is the purpose of describing marriage in a certain way. Does the media present marriage as an economic issue, religious issue, cultural issue etc. I also looked into the gender aspect of marriage in the media, meaning I paid close attention to see if media discussion of marriage centers on men or women, or both. In addition, I looked into how media discuss the connection of marriage practices with one another and their connection with marriage itself. In other words, I looked at whether bride price, dowry, and virginity ritual carry the same weight in the news articles or if they were discussed differently depending on their relevance to the frame through which marriage is represented. I coded the verbal text of the news articles. The analysis did not take into account any photographs, graphics, or other art components.

How Data Were Analyzed

I used qualitative analysis to discover the media frames for marriage and marriage rituals. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research is helpful for understanding the nuances of societies because it allows scholars to evaluate material with the goal of letting the content speak for itself while inductively selecting the frames.

This entails the researcher going through the material numerous times, establishing tentative frame identifications, and then reviewing the material again to

check if the frame categories still work after more reflection and study (Flick et al., 2004). When evaluating the frames that are present, this approach also gives the researchers more freedom to evaluate contextual and cultural cues within the statements (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

To evaluate the materials, the following steps were taken. After the articles were printed out, each article was read at least three times. Two times in Farsi and one time in English as available on the news website. However, the analysis was made based on the Farsi version due to better accuracy and better comprehension of the content.

The two-thirds rule was used to assess the overall presence of the frames (Nitz & West, 2004). According to this rule, a frame is dominant in a story when the frame appears two-thirds of the time or more. Applying the two-thirds rule helped with identifying the dominant frames in all of the news articles. Once the marriage frame was identified in news articles, I looked into what quotes and whose quotes are used to support the frame. Meanwhile, I also looked into the content of the subheadings in order to find out its connection with the frames represented in the articles.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings and Data Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of the study, and my analysis and discussion of those findings. The collected data focused on how the popular press in Afghanistan framed their discussion of marriage practices, such as bride price, dowry, and virginity ritual within the time period from 2010 to August 2021. The data were collected from two newspapers, *8 Sobh* and *Khama Press*. In the following chapter, the results are presented along with their analysis and the media frame. My major conclusion: most of the newspapers and magazines in Afghanistan frame marriage as an economic issue.

Frame 1: Marriage as an Economic Burden/Issue

Twelve of the 31 articles framed marriage as an economic issue when they focused on the high cost of marriage and marriage rituals. Whether or not bride price, dowry, and virginity ritual is a question of human rights, educational rights, women's rights, or any other kind of right is hardly mentioned in these articles. These articles discuss how the high cost of weddings is putting pressure on poor families. Even in some of the articles where it is suggested that bride price and dowry should either be prohibited or regulated, it is not on the basis of the impacts they have on women, but more so because it is impacting poor families. Analysis of this framing illustrates how the economic frame diverts attention away from women's concerns.

Financial Independence as a Prerequisite for Marriage

Of the 31 articles, three focus on the need for financial independence. One article that presents marriage as an economic issue emphasized that couples who want to get married should first be financially independent in order for the marriage to be a successful one. The article, "Marriage and Poverty in Afghanistani Families," from *Khama Press* stated "Men and women in Afghanistan are not financially independent

when they get married. The couple who want to get married usually rely on the groom's father financially." In the later section of the article, it stated that "men are already in debt when the married life begins, which impacts the rest of the married life as well." Both quotations from the article illustrated how marriage is framed as an economic issue that either puts pressure on the groom if he is financially independent, or on the groom's father when that a man is not financially independent. By saying "Men are already in debt when the married life begins," the article implied that a man bears the financial burden of marriage even before the wedding day because not only are men responsible for the wedding costs, but they also have the responsibility to arrange everything in advance so the wed couple move in together. This arrangement includes a furnished house, gold for the bride in the form of jewelry which is culturally a must for a bride to wear on her wedding day, and expensive sets of clothes for a bride and her family. Basically, "Men are already in debt when the married life begins" indicated all the financial issues, and hence marriage is framed as an economic issue that primarily affects men.

A recommendation was made at the end of one article: "Parents should pay attention to their children's education and career and teach them to be financially independent before they start a married life. Once they are financially stable, then they should think about marriage" (cite needed). This recommendation suggested that being financially independent is the only important criterion before starting a married life and parents should make sure their children meet this criterion; only then are they ready for marriage. Basically, this article proved that marriage is framed through economics, then the problem is poverty, and men are the ones who are most affected.

In contrast, if marriage were framed as a gendered institution, then the problem is the way it treats women, and the solution would be to change gender

norms. In that case, the recommendations for parents would not only be on how to teach their children to be financially independent before marriage, but also to teach them other crucial criteria.

Even articles reporting statements from the Ministry of Women's Affairs focused on regulating marriage expenses because of the impacts on poor families, not on women. One of the articles, "Government Putting Limitations to Wedding Expenses," published in *8 Sobh* reported the opinion of Husn Banu Ghazanfar, a politician in Afghanistan, who formerly served as the Minister of Women's Affairs. Ghazanfar stated that "Weddings have become like a competition among youths in Afghanistan. Therefore, some policies need to be created and implemented because these kinds of weddings put a huge pressure on poor families." Because marriage was framed as an economic issue, Ghazanfar's opinion on the poverty aspect of dowry and bride price is reported. If marriage was framed as a gendered institution, then the problem is the impact of marriage rituals on women. In that case, Ghazanfar's opinion on the impacts of dowry and bride price on women would have been reported since she represents the Ministry of Women Affairs, and her concerns should be women related.

Later in the same article, Ghazanfar was quoted to have said, "The conflicts between families are due to the high cost of weddings which eventually women pay the cost for."

In this quote we can see that Ghazanfar does mention that women pay the cost for the conflict that occurs between the families due to the high cost of weddings. However, the article does not provide further details on what cost women exactly pay. The article does not make it clear whether "women pay the cost" refers to the fact that women are impacted by marriage rituals or does "women pay the cost" refer to the

domestic violence that women have to go through later in their married life as a result of bride price and dowry. This ambiguity reinforces that marriage is an economic issue, and so any information not directly related to economic issues is treated as unimportant and unreported. Personal cost cannot be translated into economic cost.

Similarly, another article discussed the extravagance of weddings in Afghanistan and how it impacts poor families. This article, “Ministry of Women's Affairs: We Will Prevent High Wedding Costs,” of *8 Sobh* reported a statement from the Ministry of Women Affairs. The statement goes as follows: “The extravagance of different ceremonies, such as weddings, have impacted impoverished families, compelling them to do double shift work.” In this quote, the concern is the economy of poor families and their financial hardship of working extra hours to make wedding expenses. This quote frames marriage as an economic issue. If marriage was framed as a gendered institution, the statement coming from the Ministry of Women affairs would concern the gender impacts or marriage rituals.

Bride Price and Dowry as Men's Problems, not Women's

Because most articles frame marriage as an economic issue, bride price and dowry are also framed as men's problem, not women's. The reason is because if bride price and dowry are economic issues, and men are in charge of families' economic affairs, then dowry and bride price are problems for men, not women. This becomes evident in the three articles that discussed the impacts of bride price and dowry on men.

For example, one article, “Social Problems Caused by Bride Price” published in *8 Sobh*, stated that “Excessive marriage costs cause economic problems for families. As a result, young people are forced to immigrate illegally abroad in order to work hard and earn the wedding costs. A number of youths in Afghanistan, also start

using drugs.” In this quote, young people referred only to young men, not young women, because in the Afghanistani culture men are breadwinners and also are responsible for all the wedding costs. Therefore, this article explained that due to high wedding costs, men are compelled to immigrate illegally to other countries, like Iran and Pakistan, and some men even start using drugs which implies that the economic pressure leads men to use drugs.

Another article defined bride price and dowry as men’s problem by reporting government regulations about weddings’ expenses. This article, “Religious Scholars in Bamyan Puts Sanction on Forced and Underaged Marriage,” reported views of religious scholars in Bamyan. The religious scholars are quoted to have said: “the costs of weddings and dowry should be reduced to 100,000 Afghani. And no bride’s family should get more than 25 grams of gold from the groom’s family.” This quote indicated that the focus is on the economic burden put on men due to dowry and gold because it is always a groom or his family who should pay dowry and manage the amount of gold the bride’s family decides during the marriage proposal. Even the way the sentences are formed in this quote demonstrated that bride price is a men’s problem and there is an economic burden on men. For example, “no bride’s family should get more than 25 grams of gold from the groom’s family,” implied that the bride and her family put pressure on the groom and his family. If bride price and dowry were not framed as a men’s problem, the quote could be something like “families should not exceed having more than 25 grams of gold,” instead of “no bride’s family should get more than 25 grams of gold from the groom’s family.” By mentioning the bride’s family, blame can be placed on the bride, not on the cultural customs.

Additionally, even though the title of this article suggested that religious scholars in Bamyan put sanctions on forced and underage marriage, the content of the article barely discussed forced and underage marriage. What does that imply? Forced and underage marriage are not men's issues because it is always girls who are the target of underage marriage and forced marriage in Afghanistan, and all that is available in this article is "religious scholars in Bamyan condemn underage marriage and forced marriages." This quote did not go any further. The rest of the article discussed the amount of gold, as explained earlier. This lack of details on forced and underage marriage also supports that bride price and dowry are men's problem and discussion on men's issue carries a heavier weight in the content of the article. Articles frame and focus divert attention away from women.

Another article framed the high costs of weddings as a man's problem by addressing the cost of menu items and the number of guests attending the wedding. The article is "What Do People Say About the Law on Weddings?" from *8 Sobh* and has two parts; the first part mainly discussed marriage law and the later part discussed people's reaction to the law. The article's first part indicated that "the marriage law has regulated the number of guests not to exceed more than 500 individuals and the price of the menu for food per person was set at maximum 400 Afghani." In the later section of the article, it was reported that "People who disobey this law will be penalized." Both quotes from this article framed marriage as an economic issue that places monetary burdens on men. The number of guests and the price for food both are economic concerns and a groom or his father has the responsibility to take care of them. The penalty also implied a threat that people should obey the marriage law so there is less economic burden on men.

The next part of this article addressed people's reaction to marriage law by quoting Mohammad Elham, an inhabitant of Kabul city. Elham stated that "If marriage law is implemented, many young individuals will be able to get married and create families." Elham's quote implied that young individuals are barred from getting married and creating families only due to financial barriers, which strengthens marriage as an economic frame that only injures men.

Group Wedding

Out of 31 articles, five of them presented marriage as a financial issue by encouraging group weddings to decrease wedding expenses. These articles are "Group Wedding of 100 Couples in Daikundi Province" from *8 Sobh*, "Group Wedding of 110 Couples in Helmand Province" from *8 Sobh*, "Group Wedding of 50 Couples in Qandahar Province" from *Khama Press*, "Group Wedding of 280 Couples in Kabul" from *Khama Press*, and "First Group Wedding in Baghlan Province" from *Khama Press*. The core message conveyed through these group weddings articles is that group weddings decrease extravagant wedding costs, which is something helpful for poor families.

For example, "Group Wedding of 280 Couples in Kabul" from *Khama Press* reported opinions and messages of the couples who had their wedding as a group in the same day and the message goes as follow: "The couples said that the costs of weddings were high and they could not marry individually. They described the day of group wedding as the best day of their lives and urged other families to prevent the high cost of marriages." This article and the couples' messages indicated that financial burden is the main issue of getting married. That is, couples who want to get married should consider group weddings and families, especially poor families, should also encourage their children to consider a group wedding.

Similarly, “Group Wedding of 110 Couples in Helmand Province” from 8 *Sobh* reported opinions of some of the parents whose children were part of the group wedding. The father of one of the grooms stated that “he is glad to attend his son’s wedding in the form of a group wedding and he is happy that he could prevent all the unnecessary wedding expenses that would have otherwise cost him.” This quote from one of the groom’s fathers is an indication that parents, mainly the groom's fathers, are highly concerned about the financial burden they have to go through when their sons get married. Because marriage is framed as an economic issue, the concern of the groom’s father is also reported on the financial burden. If marriage were framed as a gendered institution, then the problem is the way it treats women. In that case, the concern of the groom’s father would not be only limited to financial burden but also other aspects of marriage, such as how their sons should respect their wives and how to make the marriage work and not let it lead to divorce, given the high taboo attached to divorce in Afghanistani culture.

In short, these five news articles provided a solution to the financial burden of marriage expenses by encouraging group weddings implying that marriage is a financial issue and group weddings are the solution.

Religion and Economics

One of the articles discussed the lack of religious basis for dowry and bride price. However, even in an article focusing on religion, it used religion as a justification to decrease the financial burden, not because it impacts women. For example, one article, “Religious Scholars in Baghlan: Weddings with High Costs Lack Religious Basis” in 8 *Sobh*, reported views of religious scholars and university professors of Baghlan province. One of the religious scholars stated that “Islam does not permit weddings with high costs, so people should stop having their weddings

with high costs.” The same article quoted another religious scholar, Farid Foroutan, who said “There are so many unwanted marriage rituals, all of them are foolish. People should, therefore, stop performing all these rituals that are not allowed by Sharia (Islamic religious law).” Because these articles have framed marriage as an economic issue, opinions of religious scholars are quoted that focus on high costs of marriage and marriage rituals and the perspective of religion about those costs. The quotations from both of the religious scholars used religion as a justification for why dowry and bride price should be prohibited, implying that weddings with high costs are the main concern of *Sharia* law.

However, if one examines Sharia law on marriage, there are many things that Sharia and Islam do not permit, such as unequal treatment of spouse, marriage practices that violates an individual’s marital rights, marriage practices that violate women’s right, and marriage practices that are discriminatory to one specific gender. The fact that articles focus on cost, rather than on these issues, illustrate how an economic framing of marriage diverts attention away from gendered concerns.

Frame 2: Marriage is a Private Arrangement

One article discussed marriage as a private arrangement, not something that public policy can or should govern. This article, “Government Putting Limitations to Wedding Expenses” from *8 Sobh*, reported the opinion of Sayeda Muzhgan Mustafawi, Afghanistan's deputy minister of women’s affairs. Mustafawi was quoted to have stated, “There were several marriage policies created in the previous years, but they were never implemented because they were considered an intervention to civilian’s private affairs. After some revision and adjustment, a new policy will be created and implemented.” Mustafawi, despite being from the Ministry of Women’s affairs, accepted the idea that marriage was a private arrangement and did not focus

on the impacts of dowry and bride price on women. Mustafawi focused on the policy's impact on civilians' private affairs. Rather than explain that marriage is a public concern, Mustafawi accepted that a revision of marriage policies was needed not on the basis of respect and impact for women, but because of respect for people's private affairs.

Frame 3: Cropping Virginity out of the Frame

The eight articles from *8 Sobh* and *Khama Press* discussing virginity failed to regard virginity as a marriage ritual or discuss it in relation with other marriage rituals, such as dowry and bride price. The lack of discussion of virginity as a marriage ritual and the exclusion of virginity from the discussion of other marriage practices further strengthens the economic frame of marriage. In other words, if marriage is framed through economics, then virginity would be irrelevant because it is not economic. That is why virginity is reported in completely different articles where there is no mention of marriage or other marriage rituals, such as bride price and dowry. In fact, in the articles that reported about virginity, the focus is not on virginity as a ritual, but on the so-called test that is assumed to prove a woman's virginity and the laws that attempted to ban the test but were never successfully implemented.

For example, one of the articles, "Virginity Testing Will be Banned" from *8 Sobh*, reported that "According to the government's new health policy virginity testing will be banned in all clinics and hospitals of Afghanistan." As obvious from the title, this article mainly discussed the ban of virginity testing in the hospitals of Afghanistan. The ban in this article referred to a presidential decree announced first in 2016 to ban virginity testing (Kelly, 2018). Again, in July 2018, a new policy was announced by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) to bar government health

workers from conducting virginity tests (Barr, 2018). Both policies have been ignored and the test is conducted up to the present time (Barr, 2018).

Interestingly, the articles on virginity testing did not mention why the test is done: to determine if a woman is eligible to marry. Neither article talked about virginity testing as a marriage ritual nor is the information about virginity put into relationship with other information in the context of marriage. Instead, the focus is on virginity testing, separate from any broader frame or context. Even though virginity testing is a marriage ritual in practice, it is not reported as a marriage ritual in the news articles because virginity testing does not fit the economic frame of marriage while bride price and dowry do.

Another article focused on virginity testing and the circumstances under which the test should be allowed. The article, “Cabinet Rules Committee Decision: Virginity Testing Without a Woman’s Consent and Court’s Order is not Valid” from *8 Sobh*, quoted Mohammad Sarwar Danish, Afghanistan’s former Vice-President, who stated, “virginity testing without women’s consent and court order is not permitted and any attempt in doing so will result in imprisonment.” Bearing in mind Danish’s statement, we can see that this article also does not talk about virginity in the context of marriage and does not refer to virginity as a ritual. It also operates in a frame that assumes it is an individual “civilian’s private affair.” Instead, the focus is on the circumstances under which the virginity testing could be performed. Besides, the part that says “any attempt in doing so will result in imprisonment,” implied that the punishment is only if a woman is made to undergo a virginity testing without her consent or without the court law. Thus, the punishment is not on the basis of viewing virginity testing as a harmful cultural/marriage practice.

In addition to the above analyzed articles, there are seven other articles both in *8 Sobh* and *Khama Press* that only report about the ban on virginity testing and do not regard virginity as a ritual or mention its connection to marriage. These articles are:

1. “Violations of Virginity Testing to be Seriously Investigated”
2. “Request for a Ban on Virginity Test, at Least 150 Tests are Performed Annually”
3. “World Health Organization: Virginity Testing should be Banned in Afghanistan”
4. “Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) Has Once Again Called for an Unconditional Ban on Virginity Testing”
5. “Sima Samar: Banning Virginity Testing Does not Mean Promoting Immorality”
6. “Scholars: Virginity Testing is illegal”
7. “A Study Based on the Narratives of Women: Virginity Testing is Painful”

The titles of these articles make clear a pattern, and the pattern is a ban on virginity testing, not a discussion on virginity as a marriage ritual. That is why I did not go into further analysis of these articles. These articles do not discuss virginity as something connected to marriage either.

In chapter one, it was explained that “virginity ritual” is something that is not explicitly talked about during the marriage negotiations but is considered to be one of the most important marriage rituals. In most cases, women face severe consequences due to the “virginity ritual,” and yet there is a lack of discussion on “virginity ritual” in the news articles. The lack of discussion of the virginity ritual further reinforces that the news articles in Afghanistan frame marriage as an economic issue, devoid of women’s concerns. That is why any marriage rituals that have economic elements are

included in the marriage discussion and the marriage rituals that do not have economic elements are excluded from marriage discussion. The effect of the economic frame is to crop discussion of virginity ritual out of the picture.

If marriage were framed as a gendered institution, then the problem is the way it impacts women, and the media discussion would be on how to change harmful marriage practices. In that case, virginity testing would not only be discussed in the context of marriage but also a large section of news articles would discuss the trauma, anxiety and long-term impacts of virginity testing on women and why it should be banned.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis I analyzed how marriage practices, such as dowry, bride price, and “virginity ritual” are described in newspapers and magazines of Afghanistan. In particular, my aim was to explore how media in Afghanistan frame their discussion of marriage practices. Through my analysis, I found out that newspapers and magazines in Afghanistan frame marriage as an economic issue. Five main implications of this framing were identified in my analysis.

First, because marriage is framed as an economic issue, bride price and dowry are included in the marriage discussion because they have economic elements. In contrast, the virginity ritual is excluded from marriage discussion because the virginity ritual does not have economic elements.

Second, bride price and dowry are framed as men’s problem, not women’s. The reason is because if bride price and dowry are an economic issue, and men are in charge of families’ economic affairs, then dowry and bride price are a problem for men, not women.

Third, the news articles that provided a solution to the financial burden of marriage expenses by encouraging group weddings framed marriage as a financial issue and group weddings are the solution. Broader changes to marriage are not needed. Simply changing the way marriages are conducted solves the problem. The economic frame diverts attention away from discussions of broader changes.

Fourth, some articles discussed the lack of a religious basis for dowry and bride price. However, religion is used as a justification to decrease financial burden. Again, with the focus on economics, broader discussions of what religion does and does not allow in terms of the treatment of women are framed out of the story.

Fifth and finally, some articles discussed marriage as a private arrangement, not something that public policy can cover. This focus on the individual also means the solution to the problem of virginity rituals is whether or not a particular woman consents to testing, not whether broader policy and cultural changes are needed.

All of these implications lead us to one point: There is a lack of women's voices, perspectives, and needs in the way the popular press in Afghanistan frame their discussion of marriage practices. This lack of women's voices, perspectives, and needs limits the ability of audiences to form a more complete understanding about the serious impacts marriage rituals have on women.

Limitations to Conclusions

I recognize these conclusions need to be contextualized. Critiquing anyone for their choices, when they are operating within a complex scene of constraint, requires generosity. I also want to be careful not to attribute motives. Answering *why* these frames were used is beyond the scope of this thesis, although I can offer hypotheses. A separate qualitative interview with journalists is required in order to find out why an economic frame was used.

First, even though the discussion of marriage practices in the news articles are mostly about practices in rural areas, the readers of newspapers are urban populations and not rural populations due to their low literacy rates. But, even if rural people do not read the articles, the frames still influence them because the information and messages in the news articles are carried back to rural populations by the children of rural populations who travel to urban areas for the purpose of better education. When these children travel back to their homes in rural areas during breaks, holidays, and weekends, they spread the information of news articles orally to their families. The content of news reaches the whole population via word of mouth.

Second, I do not necessarily put the entirety of blame on the journalists of Afghanistan for framing marriage practices as an economic issue because, given the cultural constraints, journalists' agency is also limited. Journalists are pressured to consider the possible reaction when they discuss culturally sensitive topics, such as virginity. Journalists face backlash from locals who are extremely religious and conservative. That is why I do not argue that the journalists' framing of marriage practices as an economic frame is fully intentional. Their framing could be intentional or by default. They could knowingly and intentionally frame marriage as economic because it allows them to avoid challenging cultural norms, or because it is a way to induce change in men. They might also default to economic frames because that reflects how politicians frame marriage.

My thesis project focuses on *what* frame was used, not necessarily *why* a certain frame was used. While finding out the reason behind why an economic frame is used requires future research, I still argue that the economic frame is problematic because the frame has a real effect on political possibilities. If problems are framed as economic, then solutions are economic as well, which means solutions that empower women are made less impossible to conceive. Whether journalists frame marriage practices as economic intentionally or by default, framing both creates and reflects cultural frames. When marriage is framed as an economic issue this, in turn, delimits the types of solutions that might be imagined.

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