

**WOMEN IN A CHANGING SOCIETY**  
**Baltistan 1992**

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This paper is mainly based on the results of a number of interviews conducted in 1992. In Skardu I was able to interview 75 women, some of them in varying types of employment, others student midwives or students at a newly founded College. During the summer of the same year a further 43 interviews were conducted with married women in the village of Kandey in East Baltistan.

I had visited Baltistan several times in previous years and had always stayed with the family of my first interpreter in Skardu. The family came from East Baltistan, and every time I stayed with them there were numerous relatives from Chhorbat there who were passing through Skardu on their way back home from Karachi. On one occasion a student from Chhorbat also stayed there for a couple of days. He was studying medicine in Karachi.

In the evening we were all sitting together chatting when somebody mentioned that the following day there would be a wedding in the town. At that my interpreter said laughingly that his nephew, the medical student from Chhorbat, had got married some time ago, but he had not been very happy and therefore had divorced his wife soon afterwards. The way this was said surprised me and I became interested and wondered why the interpreter told the story in such a malicious tone. From then on I could not stop thinking about the subject of marriage in Baltistan, and I began to look for an opportunity to find out more about it.

In early summer of 1992 I went to Baltistan again, and this time it was my plan to interview Shia and Noorbakhshia women. In the meantime I had learnt a lot more about the life of women in Baltistan and had been able to observe family life in some detail. I

thought that I was now ready to conduct some interviews, and in the end I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to do so.

By now I had some knowledge of the two main groups in Baltistan, the Shia in the West and the Noorbakhshia in the East. I had been with the Shia in the rapidly growing town of Skardu and with the Noorbakhshia in the small town of Khaplu and in the village of Kandey in the Hushe Valley, both in the Eastern part of Baltistan.

I had learnt that the Shia and Noorbakhshia had lived together peacefully for a long time. However, there were obviously not only similarities between the two groups but also a number of differences which effected their societies. Above all there were different traditions regarding marriage and divorce which had markedly different social effects, especially for women.

The normal Muslim marriage contract is permanent, but allows divorce. Traditionally many Baltis go through two, three, four, five or even more divorces in the course of their lives. Although the men are privileged since they have the right to divorce their wives without fuss, it is not uncommon for a woman to get a divorce from her husband. Once a couple is divorced there is no prejudice against them, and both partners, men and women, can remarry.

The Shias have traditionally preferred the Mut'a marriage. It is a system based on a marriage contract between a man and a woman allowing marriage without a lot of formalities for a fixed period only. It is even possible to get married for only one day. As a rule young couples sign a Mut'a contract for two, three, four or five years for a first marriage. For the duration of the marriage the woman partner gets a payment from the man. At the expiry of the fixed period the couple will either separate or sign a new contract. If there are any children born during the marriage they go to the father's side. The Mut'a system does not provide for any rights to inheritance between the couple.

If a couple decides to sign a second Mut'a contract, then the period will normally be fixed for hundred years. In practice this means that the marriage has become permanent, not unlike a normal Muslim marriage. In answer to my further questions I was told by the Baltis

that the Shia of Baltistan had a very strong belief in the positive effects of the 100 year Mut'a contract. It is supposed to bring benefits and great rewards after death. When I enquired why they believed this, nobody was able to give a reasonable explanation.

I was told furthermore that between 1960 and 1980 people in the Shia community had developed a new way of Mut'a, if it was intended to have repeatedly short marriages of several years duration with the same partner. This new form of marriage had been introduced by the women of Kharmang, and as one interpreter pointed out it gave the women a stronger position vis-a-vis their husbands. In 1992 some interpreters suggested that in Skardu this form of marriage was slowly disappearing.

With all this information available to me I began to work out the interviews with the women in Skardu. There were two aims: First I wanted to find out the family situation of the women and the circumstances of their gainful employment. The second aim was to find out about the Mut'a marriage of the Shia, whether it was disappearing, and if so why, since it had obviously been preferred to the permanent Muslim marriage for such a long time.

With regard to the Mut'a marriage the results were at first sight surprising. Only two of the 75 women interviewed confessed to have married according to the Mut'a system. One of them had been married for 5 years, the other one for ten. One woman came from Skardu, the other one from Kharmang. Their ages were 25 and 18 years respectively.

Nearly half of the women interviewed came from mixed families, i.e. their parents had moved from different areas and places to Skardu and therefore were Noorbakhshias or Sunnis, and this fact distorts the results. But I am still convinced that the interpreters were right as well to say that the Mut'a marriage had lost its attractiveness. The way the women reacted to my question about Mut'a was so revealing and showed that Mut'a was socially not acceptable, perhaps due to the influence of the culturally superior down country, i.e. Panjab in Pakistan.

It would take one too far to give here more details about this first set of interviews, and I will therefore now deal with the village interviews.

During the planning stages I had thought that it would not be easy to talk to many village women during the summer months when everybody was busy working in the fields. But I was lucky and got my chance due to the fact that there was a sudden petrol shortage in the country. I was on my way to Kandey when the shortage struck. There was no petrol or kerosine to be had anywhere in Baltistan, and consequently I was stuck in Khaplu. For two days I waited in vain for transport, then I decided to walk to the Hushe Valley, accompanied by two porters and my interpreter from Skardu. It was the right decision, and we enjoyed the tour. We had almost reached the village when a youngish man overtook us and started talking to us. He turned out to be the Akhon of Kandey, which means that he was the second mullah of the village besides the Syed who was the leading mullah. In addition to his religious duties he was also working in tourism and mountaineering. He invited us to stay in his garden, and we gladly accepted and pitched our tents underneath some lovely fruit trees. When the Akhon heard about my plans to talk to the women of the village he was extremely helpful and invited the women to be interviewed in his garden. We got on very well with the women who considered the meetings in the pleasant shady garden as a welcome break from their normal early summer work. Some of the women even brought their spindles and worked while listening to the interviews. Fortunately my interpreter was a sensitive and understanding man who was immediately accepted by the women. Apart from one exception none of the village men interfered in any way. They understood that this was a women's party where men were not wanted. There are about 200 married women in Kandey, and I could interview 43 of them.

It is impossible to go into all the details of the interviews, but I would like to mention some of the more important points.

There was not a single woman in this group who had been to school although some of them could read and write a little in Arabic script which they had learnt at the medressa.

The woman with the greatest number of children in the group had eight children. She was, like her husband, 37 years of age. Both had been divorced once before they remarried. At the time of their second marriage they were 20 years old. None of their children had died. They were living in an extended family, but the woman was convinced that there were advantages to the nuclear family, since there were fewer disagreements in this system, as she pointed out.

The woman who reported the highest mortality of her children had given birth to nine children, who died in infancy, with four children still alive. Her husband was 50, she was 48 years old. They had got married when she was 12 and her husband was 14, and they had never been divorced. The woman was not convinced of the benefits of family planning and approved of the extended family. There were five other persons in her family.

All the women, except for one who was from the neighbouring village of Hushe, were born in Kandey. All the husbands of these women also were from Kandey. In view of this I would assume that these women would be very conservative in their thinking.

Eight of the women had been divorced once. Three of these had afterwards married a divorced man. At the time of the second marriage none of the women was older than 24. Of the husbands one was twice divorced, two even three times. The oldest of the divorced men was 40 years old when he married for the third time - a woman of 20. Their ages are now 60 and 40 years.

According to these interviews the ideal age for marriage is 12 for women, 18 for men. Of the women interviewed 14 had married aged 12, 6 of the men aged 18. The marriage age for men varies more than for women. It appears that there is greater social pressure exerted on women to get married at a particular age.

The second marriages of divorced women were in all cases arranged, although all of them except one very young woman had been consulted and had decided freely to marry that particular man. Second and all further marriages of men are arranged by the men themselves.

All the women interviewed expressed the view that their daughters should decide themselves whether to marry a particular man - after due consultation with their parents.

The question whether their families would accept an offer of marriage for their daughter from a man of good repute from a Sunni or Shia family was answered in the affirmative by eight women. Asked whether they would arrange a marriage for a son, seven women answered with a clear yes - all the others qualified their yes - only after consultation, and not against his wishes.

Only three women had heard of family planning. After explanations 18 women thought family planning was a good thing. One woman of 23, mother of only one child, explained spontaneously that she did not want many children, since she had seen the misery mothers of many children had to endure.

Asked about the ideal family set up five women preferred the nuclear family of two generations while all the others considered the extended family best.

Seven of the women had never had a child. The 43 women had altogether born 211 children. 98 of these children had died in infancy.

39 women said they would have liked to go to school when they were children. All the women were strongly in favour of education for girls from primary to tertiary level.

The children of three of the women did not attend school, eight women reported that only their sons went to school. 21 women sent their daughters to school or expected to do so once the girls had reached school age. The remaining women were childless.

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## List of Interpreters

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Wazir Ghulam Mehdi, Hussainabad near Skardu  
Mohammad Iqbal, Islamabad  
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Mohammad Abbas, Skardu  
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