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Beyond societal pressure: Negotiating gender equality for marital prospects in courtship among older educated unmarried women in Botswana

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Abstract

While existing studies have shown that unmarried older women, particularly in many African societies, are often stigmatized and pressured due to their marital status, few studies have captured the experiences of educated older unmarried women about societal pressure to marry. This study examines marital pressure and compromises related to gender equality in the courtship experiences of educated older unmarried Botswanan women. A qualitative approach was employed to study the unique experiences of 23 Botswanan women aged 30 to 42. Using a blend of convenience and purposive sampling to recruit participants from an online female group chat, semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone and face-to-face interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, revealing five key findings: first, that pressure to marry is a matter of personal choice; second, women experience vicarious pressure; third, morality and self-satisfaction influence women's marital decisions; fourth, women make compromises with loved and trusted partners; and fifth, compromises occur when there is no fear of emotional harm.

Keywords: Botswana, societal pressure, gender equality, courtship experiences, unmarried women

Introduction

As women approach what is socially considered a 'late marriage' age in the African context, the pressure to find a life partner may intensify (Oderinde, 2013; Zwang, 2004) ^[34]. This pressure can be attributed to the societal value placed on marriage in many African societies, the sense of fulfillment it brings to women, the stigma it alleviates, and among other reasons (Belachew *et al.*, 2022; Güner & Öztürk, 2023; Smith, 2017) ^[4, 18, 30]. For older women who attract a partner during this supposed 'late marriage' age, compromises in gender equality may occur during courtship to secure their partners' marital commitment.

Existing literature has not examined or captured gender inequality specifically in the courtship experiences of older educated unmarried women in African societies where being married confers social respect and being unmarried attracts societal backlash (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014) ^[26]. Therefore, this study investigates the presence of gender equality-related compromises in the courtship experiences of this older educated unmarried Botswana women. Specifically, it aims to investigate ^[1]: the manifestation of pressure in their courtship, and ^[2] examines the compromises related to gender equality that these educated, unmarried Botswanan women may make in courtship.

Current Study and Significance

Exploring a line of inquiry like this is necessary for several reasons. First, many African societies embrace pre-marital relationships as a precursor to marriage (Cole & Thomas, 2019) ^[9]. In light of the various gender equality issues highlighted by studies on marriage—particularly within the African context—I believe that focusing on pre-marital relationships could provide insights that help avert potential marital issues women may face in the future. Furthermore, as the reality of delayed marriage continues to grow, women—particularly in Africa—often become more vulnerable to its negative impacts (Madachi, 2024) ^[24]. This increased pressure highlights the need for research in this area to develop strategies that can better support women in navigating these challenges. Additionally, no study—at least none known to me or identified through an extensive review of the literature—has specifically

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explored this topic within the African context, especially in light of modern-day realities. Lastly, while social science researchers have given significant attention to gender equality within the context of marriage, indicating that substantial knowledge already exists in this area, there remains a pressing need to explore less-examined aspects of relationships.

Background

Education and Gender Equality

Education has proven to be a powerful tool in advocating for gender equality (Guthridge *et al.*, 2022) ^[19]. At the formal level, academic institutions have integrated gender equality-related courses and activities aimed at reorienting students and society at large (Condrón *et al.*, 2023) ^[10]. Studies focused on exposing and eradicating long-standing gender-detrimental practices are actively encouraged (Dahal *et al.*, 2022) ^[12]. Governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at both international and national levels have also remained resilient in this fight against gender inequality (Srivastava *et al.*, n.d.). Similarly, the media has played a notable role in this advocacy. Not only has it helped in reaching a vast and diverse audience with educational content on gender equality, but it has also provided the global community with various platforms for groups and individuals to address gender equality issues within their immediate environments (L.A. *et al.*, 2023; Reena, 2023) ^[29]. Apparently, the goodwill message of gender equality has gained so much prominence with keen attention given to the female gender.

While the idea of gender equality does not prioritize one gender over another or view any gender as superior, it emphasizes equality between genders; greater attention has been given to women. This is understandable, as women are often the marginalized gender, and their status needs to be uplifted (Kumar, 2024) ^[21]. As a result, various forms of empowerment are provided to women to improve their standards and mitigate potential gender-based inequalities that societal norms may impose on them. Literature and social discourse are increasingly challenging traditional gender roles, promoting narratives that empower women and advocate for equality (Munyangeyo, 2023) ^[25]. With this increased level of sensitization—particularly among women—on the subject of gender equality, it is intended that women are better equipped to resist any form of inequality directed at them (Yesil & Balci Karaboga, 2021) ^[33]. However, in African society, where marriage is highly valued, does a woman's educational status on gender equality override societal pressure to marry? Do her convictions about gender equality still hold true in the face of her need to secure the marital commitment of her partner with the reality of what society deems as "late" marriage stirring her in the face?

Previous study and Gap

Smith's investigation on how women view womanhood in Botswana provided insight into the cultural and traditional realities of Botswana's society, particularly societal view on marriage. It further highlights evidence that indicate that a study on gender equality in courtship practices within the same context may be a feasible adventure. This is because the high value placed on being married, and the social respect the women expressed marriage confers on them, and the stigma attached to remaining single all suggest that

social pressure to marry runs deep. Based on Smith's findings, the idealization of marriage—often without regard to the quality of the marital relationship, the characteristics of an ideal partner, or the economic security marriage might offer—suggest the likelihood of how gender equality may be negotiated also in courtship. It is against this backdrop that her study serves as a precedent and springboard for this study.

Gender Equality Pressures in Courtship for Older Unmarried Women in Botswana

Regarding gender equality, we are not where we used to be, but neither are we where we want to be. While the global community has made a level of progress on the issue of gender inequality, some regions have achieved greater success and made more remarkable strides in promoting gender equality than others. In Africa, certain cultural practices and social norms still present natural resistance to the success of gender equality campaigns and advocacies. A recent case in Niger State, Nigeria, where about 100 female orphans were married off in the name of religion and culture, starkly illustrates this seemingly natural resistance. From the event, it is clear that the effectiveness of gender equality-based policy becomes even more complex when religious doctrines conflict with constitutional principles, particularly in countries where there is a power division between religious and constitutional authorities (Ojogbo & Edu, 2022) ^[27]. The government's involvement in facilitating these marriages contradicts efforts to promote gender equality and highlights how deeply entrenched cultural and religious beliefs can influence policy decisions.

The amplification of Africa's reality on the subject of gender inequality is not intended to push a one-sided narrative that absolves other continents of gender equality-related issues—as commonalities and differences exist in our struggles with gender equality—nor to downplay the unique challenges they face. Rather, it highlights how deeply ingrained the influence of culture, societal norms, and religion, along with the shortcomings of gender equality-based policies, have made achieving gender equality challenging in Africa (Abdullahi, 2024) ^[26]. This indicates a need for custom-tailored strategies to dismantle these barriers and promote the successful adoption and widespread acceptance of gender equality across the continent (IMF, 2023). In an effort to understand the dynamics and interplay of gender equality at various levels of human interaction, social science researchers have observed gender equality from different perspectives. However, for African researchers, as is the case with their global counterparts, one area that has received significant attention in their exploration of gender equality is marriage.

Of particular interest to African social researchers is gender equality in marriage. This focus is important for two reasons. First, the cultural foundations of many African traditional marriage systems, along with certain religious provisions, contradict the core tenets of gender equality principles, highlighting a contentious intersection that reveals the need for social researchers' exploration in this area (Fombad, 2014) ^[17]. Second, marriage holds significant social, cultural, and economic value in African societies (Ojuade, 2020) ^[28]; it is frequently viewed as a milestone and a marker of personal and social stability, making it an institution that is vulnerable to gender inequality. In African societies where marriage is highly valued, individuals—

especially women—experience pressure to marry by a certain age (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Abdullahi, 2024) [26]. This societal pressure can lead older single women to adopt courtship behaviors that prioritize marriage prospects over personal preferences or ideals of equality within relationships.

When Smith (2017) [30] carried out her qualitative study on womanhood in Botswana, she emphasized that her study does not attempt to present findings that are generalizable, but one aimed at capturing the unique experiences of women in Botswana. She noted that “to say that just 30 people (who made up her study population) can speak for the whole is incongruous; adding that her sample was not representative, but rather reflected the articulated personal experiences of a small number of individuals.” While her study detailed women perception of womanhood as influenced by societal norms, values and traditions, it may not have been a reflection of the reality of a more educated group of Botswanan women whose exposure and educational level may have equipped them with enough resistance against societal pressure. Would Smith’s findings had revealed a different finding had she zoomed in on a purely educated group of Botswanan women? This study addresses this limitation by narrowing the study population to educated Botswanan women to know whether a different reality beyond societal pressure exist for women.

Courtship within the Study

This study did not attempt to define the concept of courtship broadly within the context of Botswana, nor did it differentiate between dating and courtship, as these two concepts have various definitions and are often viewed differently (Ariyo *et al.*, 2018) [2]. Instead, this study defines courtship by focusing on the unique characteristics of the understudied population, particularly their age. For women aged 30-35 in a society where marriage is seen as a life goal, admired for its status-conferring power (Smith, 2017) [30], and where being unmarried carries visible stigma, older unmarried women are likely to view any proposal from a man as a step toward marital commitment. Therefore, creating a definition that suggests differences between dating and courtship could limit the relevance and clarity of this study for the intended population. To avoid ambiguity, this study defines courtship as any pre-marital relationship initiated by a man's explicit communication of his intention to pursue a romantic relationship with a woman, to which she consents. I believe that not defining this concept may affect my search for respondents, as the distinction between courtship and dating is not universally clear within the Botswana community. Therefore, I included this definition in my post for volunteers.

Methodology

Research Design

To gain a rich understanding of the unique experiences of older, educated, unmarried Botswanan women in courtship, particularly as it relates to marital pressure and gender equality, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for this study. This approach allows the researcher the flexibility to dig deeply into participants’ individual experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) [13]. Qualitative research captures greater insights, making it particularly suited for examining sensitive topics like gender inequality, where participants’ perspectives can reveal

underlying influences that may not be evident through quantitative measures (Creswell, 2013) [11]. Thus, the qualitative approach employed in this study provided the depth and richness necessary to address the research objectives and uncover meaningful patterns that contribute to broader discussions on gender equality in relationships. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, this study explored the presence of gender inequality in the courtship relationships of older unmarried Botswanan women and the compromises they make regarding gender equality with their partners.

The primary aim of this study is not to directly assess the impact of gender equality-based education on women. Such an assessment would become necessary only after observing that (educated) women in a different context—one distinct from those explored in previous studies—show different results. Therefore, it is important to first examine whether the responses from participants align with or contradict the findings of earlier research (Smith, 2017) [30]. Establishing this initial context helps determine whether there are significant differences that warrant further investigation. A study specifically focused on the impact of gender equality-based education would require a more comprehensive approach, including a detailed assessment of teaching materials, participant engagement, and the pedagogy used. Our study, however, primarily aims to explore whether the experiences of a more educated demographic reflect or refute trends identified in previous research.

Participants Recruitment and Sample

I aimed to recruit unmarried female participants aged 30 and above who, at the time of this study, were in courtship with their male partners and had received education on gender equality. I chose age 30 as a marker because many women marry for the first time in their twenties; many scholars of single women use age 30 or 35 years as a marker to differentiate younger and older never-married women (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Byrne, 2000; Ferguson, 2000) [26, 16, 8]. Through convenience sampling, participants were voluntarily recruited from an online Telegram channel comprising eighty-five (85) Botswanan women from various ethnic groups. I selected this Telegram channel because it was created primarily to notify Botswanan female graduates on job vacancies. This Telegram group provided the primary (educated) targeted group of participants needed for this study. After obtaining permission from the group leader, I created a post to recruit participants. All 23 Botswanan women who volunteered and met the age and relationship requirements were interviewed via telephone and face-to-face interviews.

Data Collection and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants, with information gathered in both written and audio formats. Interview notes were taken, and audio recordings were made with the permission of the interviewees. The data generated from journaling and audio recordings were manually analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [6].

The audio recordings were transcribed using TurboScribe, an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered software that converts audio files into text. This software facilitated the quick transcription of all audio files from the interviews within minutes. However, the software has its limitations.

Table 1: General Information of Participants

Participants' Pseudonym	Age	Education	Interview Setting	Interview Duration (Hour min)	Courtship Duration (Year/Month)
Thato	30	Graduate	Phy/Interview	1:16	1.2
Keabetswe	30	Graduate	Phone call	1:20	2.1
Puso	30	Graduate	Phy/Interview	50	1.1
Tshepo	30	Graduate	Phy/Interview	46	1.5
Dineo	30	Graduate	Phy/Interview	54	1
Naledi	30	Graduate	Phone call	45	2.5
Kagiso	31	Graduate	Phy/Interview	1:25	1.4
Boikhutso	31	Graduate	Phone call	1:30	1.2
Ontlametse	31	Graduate	Phone call	1:20	2.3
Lesedi	31	Graduate	Phy/Interview	45	1.1
Kealeboga	32	Graduate	Phy/Interview	1	1.7
Paballo	32	Graduate	Phy/Interview	1:10	2
Mpho	33	Graduate	Phone call	1	1.5
Sedi	33	Graduate	Phone call	48	1.2
Nthabiseng	33	Graduate	Phy/Interview	40	1.4
Kelebogile	34	Graduate	Phy/Interview	1:5	2
Lerato	34	Graduate	Phone call	1:20	1.5
Boitumelo	35	Graduate	Phy/Interview	45	2
Tshegofatso	35	Graduate	Phone call	1:35	2.5
Nokuthula	36	Graduate	Phone call	45	1
Mphoeng	39	Graduate	Phone call	1:20	2.1
Tlhomamiso	39	Graduate	Phy/Interview	45	1.6
Matlodi	42	Graduate	Phy/Interview	45	2

As the interviewees were Botswanan women, their accents were not always perfectly captured by the transcription software, resulting in some misspellings in the generated transcripts. Fortunately, I was able to address these inaccuracies due to my involvement in the interviews and the audio replay function. I ensured that all audio files were transcribed on the same day as the interviews were conducted, which allowed me to maximize my memory of the sessions and clarify any unclear areas in the transcripts. Additionally, my identity as a Botswanan and my fluency in the native dialect encouraged the interviewees to code-switch, even though English was the primary language of the interviews. This did not pose a barrier; in fact, it helped bridge potential communication gaps and allowed the interviewees to express themselves more freely. Throughout the process of vetting the transcripts generated by TurboScribe, I carefully reviewed them to detect and make necessary adjustments.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze patterns within the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The study utilized inductive approach for themes' development and identification. This inductive approach allowed themes to arise naturally from the data itself, ensuring that the analysis remained receptive to new insights specific to the participants' unique experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) [15]. Through the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) [6] outline of thematic analysis, all transcripts were reviewed and coded. The material underwent rigorous reading while searching for recurring themes. The thematic analysis did not aim to describe the entire dataset in its full richness; instead, it provided a detailed account of specific aspects related to the study's overall objectives. The analysis focused on the narratives aligned with the specific themes outlined in the interview guide (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [6]. Themes were observed through the lens of the study's

objectives. In order to manage extraneous data, attention was given to meaningful patterns that are relevant to study's scope while remaining open to emerging themes. As a result of the analysis, six themes emerged, all of which are presented in the findings.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, I conducted a brief respondent validation after data collection. Participants responses were subjected to participants' review to ascertain whether information collected truly reflect their experiences. Member-checking process was effective in managing or avoiding misinterpretation and biases during analysis. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [23].

Results and Discussion

Five themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (1) Pressure to marry is a choice, (2) Vicarious Pressure exists with older men, (3) Morality and Self-satisfactory induced pressure during courtship, (4) Women make compromises with loved and trusted responsible men, and (5) Compromises exist when fear of hurt is absent. These themes are summarized in Table 2.

Theme 1: Pressure to marry is a choice

Women's descriptions of marital pressure as a choice highlighted both their resistance and resilience against societal and familial pressures often meted out to those who remain unmarried in a typical African society, especially for not being married by a certain age. The testimonies of the women interviewed indicate a clear absence of societal pressure to marry. They explicitly stated that they do not feel compelled by their society or family regarding their unmarried status, nor are they striving to secure a marital commitment from their male partners. Some women who did discuss experiencing pressure attributed it to the past. However, they expressed that while society and families may naturally attempt to put women under pressure, individuals can choose to resist.

Table 2: List of Themes and Subthemes with Sample Quotes from Women

Theme	Example Quote
Pressure to marry is a choice	Matlodi: "It amazes me when some women say they are under pressure to marry ... I tell them: then stop staying under it. ... for me being under societal or family pressure to marry just because you are aging is a choice ..." Paballo: "... when they try to put you under pressure, then pull yourself out of it, you don't have to stay under it ... I have never been pressured by anyone not in this life or the next ... I don't take nonsense from anyone"
Vicarious Pressure exists with older men	Puso: "Hmm you see, he is the one making compromises to secure my marital commitment. He is 45 years of age who unlike me is unable to deal with his family pressure mounted on him to marry. I have told him that I am not in haste to marry, because I am yet to decide whether I want to marry."
Morality and Self-satisfactory induced pressure during courtship	Mpho: "I love that I could have sex with my partner without accompanying marital obligations. We are both sexually active but sometimes feel unhappy about it. ... This current boyfriend of mine has been pressuring me to marry him also. I am giving in to his pressure because I don't want to live a promiscuous life." Lerato: "I am deaf to the voice of my society. I am getting married because I want to. Fibroid is what put me under pressure. The rate at which young women are being diagnosed of fibroid is alarming. I want to carry my own children. I am getting married next month (laughing). I love him and he loves me too."
Women make compromises with loved and trusted responsible men	Tshepo: "I don't make compromises because of my age. Age is just a number, and of what good is age in a toxic marriage? I am a lover girl, and I love my babe sooo much. I make compromises because I love him and I trust him."
Compromises exist when fear of hurt is absent	Naledi: "Have asked myself many times, can relationship work without compromises? For me as long as the compromise I make in relationship does not hurt me in anyway, and is either for our good or my good, I give up equality. Let him just be a man he wants to me [she laughs]"

- **Sedi:** Whether I marry or not is my choice ... nobody, community or family member can tell me what to do with my life. People who are not married have a life. I cannot marry just to satisfy their pressure
- **Nokuthula:** For me, I think the world has finally gotten to the point where we keep quiet about marriage. With the rate of divorce happening over the world, it is wrong to be pressured into marriage. As for me, my decision about the topic of marriage is personal and there is no fear or pressure about it Other women may say they are under pressure but as for me, I am not.
- Similar to Díaz-Diocaretz & Zavala (1985), the women in this study further expressed that their self-worth and identity extend beyond the institution of marriage:
- **Dineo:** To marry is the least of my worries. Women under pressure are those either without a life or those living among small thinking people I don't move with people with a myopic view about life. It is shameful to reduce life to the institution of marriage ... My purpose is my pressure not marriage.
- **Ontlametse:** Why should I be under pressure when a man needs me more than I need him. The child I will give to him will bear his name, I will do his cooking, his laundry, and warm his bed. All these things are stressful. He knows I am not interested in a typical Botswanan man. I need a man who understands equality. He is still trying to adjust to this idea but he has no choice. I have nothing to lose. I have my business and I am doing fine.
- On the other hand, some other women admitted that they were under pressure at a point in time. For most of these women, their mid-twenties without a partner was characterized by fear and pressure. However, the recognition that they once succumbed to such pressures but have since learned to navigate them reflects personal growth and resilience. This evolution signifies a rejection of societal norms that equate marital status with personal fulfillment, promoting the idea that individuals, especially women, can define their paths and priorities.
- **Kagiso:** Pressure is far from me. No person can put me under pressure again! I fell for it some years back when

my family pressured me to bring home a man ... I would cry and do all manners of funny things just to please my parents. Now I know better and I've learnt to deal with it. If a man can choose when to marry so can I. ... I am not getting married soon and everyone knows that. I have declared my position to my family members.

Theme 2: Vicarious Pressure exists with older men

Furthermore, the women's testimonies reveal another layer of pressure, where marital pressure is perceived as vicarious stemming from the pressures faced by men, particularly older men in courtship. This situation highlights the interconnectedness of societal expectations and individual relationships, where one partner's familial obligations can inadvertently influence the other's decisions and feelings regarding marriage. Women who are not under any form of pressure may find their fiancés pressured due to their own inability to cope with societal and familial expectations.

Thato: I am a big girl now oooo (she laughs). I have outgrown the meaningless community pressure. The little pressure I am receiving is a second-hand pressure. My man is the one under pressure. We are of the same age and he is the only child of his old mother who wants to carry her grandchild before she dies. So he is receiving pressure from right and left, and in turn making my man pressurize me into marriage. I have told him, I am not ready now and to go marry another person but he insisted on waiting for me until I bag my doctoral degree. I feel for him but I must complete my Ph.D program before I can marry him.

Keabetswe: Hmmm you see, he is the one making compromises to secure my marital commitment. He is 45 years of age who unlike me is unable to deal with his family pressure mounted on him to marry. I have told him that I am not in haste to marry, because I am yet to decide whether I want to marry.

Theme 3: Morality and Self-satisfactory induced pressure during courtship

In addition, the narratives shared by participants highlight that marital pressure often arises from deeply personal considerations rather than societal expectations. The interviewees expressed a desire to marry primarily due to

their wish to have children and to avert certain health issues that may hinder this goal. This reveals a shift from traditional notions of pressure, which are typically framed within the context of societal or familial expectations, to a more individualized perspective where personal health and motherhood take precedence.

Boitumelo: The pressure I feel about getting married does not come from them ... I want to have a child and you know, fibroid and many other health issues is serious problem these days.

Nokuthula: I am deaf to the voice of my society. I am getting married because I want to. Fibroid is what put me under pressure. The rate at which young women are being diagnosed of fibroid is alarming. I want to carry my own children. I am getting married next month (laughing). I love him and he loves me too

I don't have any pressure except for my love for children. I wish I could have a child without a man but I don't want to deny the poor child of the presence of a father figure also. That is why if I am contemplating marrying, and if I must, I must get it right.

Also, participants articulate a tension between sexual autonomy and internalized moral and religious values. Despite enjoying a sexually active relationship without being married, some women acknowledge feelings of unhappiness, which they attribute to their moral and religious beliefs.

Nthabiseng: I love that I could have sex with my partner without other marital obligations. We are both sexually active but sometimes, I feel unhappy about it... I am a Christian and I think my religion is responsible for that feeling. I lived this way with about two of my ex who also left over my refusal to marry. This current boyfriend of mine has been pressuring me to marry him also. I am giving in to his pressure because I don't want to live a promiscuous life.

Theme 4: Women make compromises with loved and trusted responsible men

The theme that gender equality compromises exist when love and trust are present between partners reveals the nuanced nature of relationships, particularly as expressed by the women in this study. These individuals often perceive compromises through the lens of emotional connection. One participant articulated her perspective on compromises, stating:

Tlhomamiso: I don't make compromises because of my age. Age is just in number, and of what good is age in a toxic marriage? I am a lover girl chai! and I love my babe soo much... I love him and I also trust him. He has forced sex on me without my total consent before. But I am fine with it! He didn't harm me ... and I cannot deny I am fine with it in some ways.

This statement underscores the idea that for many women, the foundation of a relationship—rooted in love and trust—can often shape their willingness to make compromises. The participant's assertion that her age does not dictate her decisions highlights a personal agency that transcends societal expectations about marriage and maturity.

However, the complexity of this dynamic is illustrated by her admission of having experienced a troubling aspect of their relationship:

"He has forced sex on me without my total consent. But I am not offended by it."

This statement opens a critical conversation about the nature of trust and love in relationships. While she acknowledges that her partner has crossed boundaries, her response suggests a complex emotional landscape where her love for him may cloud her judgment regarding his behavior. It raises questions about the balance between affection and the potential acceptance of unhealthy dynamics in the name of love.

Another woman reflected on similar experiences

Lesedi: I love him and it sometimes gets into my head that I allow him have his way without thinking... You know when you love someone now.... sometimes you find yourself making foolish decisions... I believe that love means understanding each other's weaknesses and sometimes adjusting to them. But I also have to remind myself of my worth.

Here, it is seen that while love can foster flexibility, it's essential that such compromises do not come at the expense of one's self-respect or safety. The acknowledgment of potential issues, like the participant's mention of forced intimacy, suggests an area where love and trust may become complicated by power dynamics. In summary, this theme reveals that while love and trust can facilitate compromises in relationships, they can also lead to challenges when boundaries are tested.

Theme 5: Compromises exist when fear of hurt is absent

Responses of sixteen of the women underscore a pragmatic approach to gender equality within relationships, suggesting that compromises are acceptable as long as they do not result in personal harm or undermine one's well-being. This perspective opens up a discussion on the complex nature of gender equality, particularly in the context of romantic relationship.

Kealeboga: Have asked myself many times, can relationship work without compromises? For me as long as the compromise I make does not hurt me in anyway, and is either for our good or my good, I give up equality... Let him just be a man he wants to me [she laughs]

The reflection on whether relationships can function without compromises highlights an essential truth: relationships inherently require some level of negotiation and adjustment (Spector, 1977). The participant emphasizes that her willingness to relinquish aspects of gender equality is contingent upon the compromises being beneficial rather than detrimental. The humor in her statement—“Let him just be a man he wants to be”—suggests a level of comfort with traditional gender roles when they do not negatively impact her autonomy or self-worth.

However, this view raises important questions about the balance of power in relationships. While compromises can facilitate harmony, they also risk reinforcing traditional gender norms if one partner consistently concedes more than the other. The participant's experience illustrates a delicate dance between maintaining a sense of self and navigating the expectations of a partner. Moreover, the idea that compromises can coexist with a semblance of gender equality is significant. It suggests that women may navigate their identities within relationships through selective compromises that preserve their core values and needs.

Societal pressure in courtship relationships is not a phenomenon experienced by women alone, but equally affects men. Interestingly, it is evident that men who are

subjected to societal pressures often transfer this influence onto their female partners, either explicitly or implicitly. This dynamic highlights the need for a more holistic approach in addressing societal pressures within romantic relationships. If women are to be liberated from the weight of societal expectations surrounding marriage, it is crucial that attention is also directed toward the male gender. Women, despite having developed significant resilience to societal pressure, may still find themselves vulnerable to the indirect or direct pressure imposed by their male partners, particularly when these men themselves are struggling with the expectations placed on them by society. This suggests that efforts to alleviate gendered pressures should not solely focus on empowering women but must also engage men. By addressing these pressures in a balanced manner, both genders can be better supported in making marital decisions that are grounded in individual agency rather than external coercion.

Also, for the women in this study, finding a balance between upholding gender equality principles and making relationship-based sacrifices is often complex and challenging. This tension lies in discerning where healthy, mutual compromise ends and where the erosion of equality begins. Relationships inherently require flexibility and compromise, which can blur the boundary between healthy give-and-take and compromising core values.

Conclusion

This study examined the manifestation of pressure in the courtship experiences of educated, older, unmarried Botswana women and the gender equality compromises they make. Twenty-three Botswana women, aged 30–42, were recruited from a Telegram channel. Using structured interviews, data were collected and analyzed through thematic analysis. The thematic analysis yielded results that differed from previous studies conducted within the study's setting, while aligning with studies that reveal some women are more pressured by factors outside of societal and familial pressure regarding marriage. This research specifically focused on educated, unmarried, and older women. This study reveals that women in this demographic are less affected by societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. Instead, they encounter alternative forms of pressure distinct from the widely cited societal expectations reported in earlier studies (Smith, 2017) ^[30].

Limitations and Further Research

A common limitation of studies like this is that they are confined to the realities of a geographical context. This study employed a qualitative-phenomenological design, and therefore the ability to generalize the findings to a larger population is limited (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ^[23]. As such, the findings may not be representative of all unmarried women, particularly those outside the specific demographic group of educated women aged 30 to 42. Additionally, the study's reliance on convenience and purposive sampling, while useful for targeting participants with relevant experiences, may introduce selection bias, limiting the diversity of perspectives captured. However, the study does suggest the potential impact of a more gender equality-based educational system, an area that future research could explore. Interviewees acknowledged the impact of gender equality-based education on their ability to withstand societal pressure. Therefore, subsequent studies could

differentiate between general education and education specifically centred on gender equality, as well as investigate whether gender equality-based education contributes to women's resistance and resilience.

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