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Indigenous perspectives on marital dynamics: A qualitative study of Sotho couples' experiences with customary marriage, stressors, strengths and indigenous marital counselling

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ABSTRACT

The study, motivated by higher divorce rates in customary marriages compared to statutory ones in a rural Eastern Cape village, critiques the dominance of Western paradigms in social sciences that marginalise African worldviews. By applying the theory of social constructionism, it explores the stressors and strengths of customary marriages, and the value of indigenous counselling through the narratives of Sotho couples. A qualitative narrative research design was employed, involving 20 participants in customary marriages for 20 twenty years, selected through non-probability purposive sampling. Data were collected through separate focus group interviews for males and females, with thematic analysis used to generate themes for analysis. Findings indicate that customary marriage preserves cultural identity, spiritual unity, and kinship. However, modern influences such as globalisation and women's empowerment challenge these traditions, contributing to marital stressors. Despite gender equality reforms, patriarchal norms often disempower women and children. Indigenous counselling, rooted in humanism, involves elders and community leaders in conflict resolution, promoting collective responsibility, strengthening bonds and fostering resilience. The study advocates for incorporating indigenous knowledge into social work practice to improve support for Sotho couples, enhance their wellbeing and reinforce cultural resilience.

Keywords: customary marriage; indigenous marital counselling; marital strengths; marital stressors

INTRODUCTION

While previous research has explored challenges in indigenous marriages, limited attention has been devoted to the holistic marital dynamics of Sotho couples from an indigenous perspective. This study addresses that gap through an in-depth qualitative analysis of their experiences with customary marriage, highlighting the stressors they encounter, the cultural strengths that support their unions, and the role of indigenous counselling in addressing marital challenges. Kgadima and Leburu (2023) note that indigenous communities face challenges in marriage, with rising divorce rates indicating a decline in cultural values. Factors such as economic pressures, rigid gender roles and modern influences create marital stress, specifically in Sotho marriages in this study (Possa-Mogoera, 2023). Customary marriage practices and indigenous counselling are crucial for preserving social cohesion and cultural identity. Local perspectives offer deeper insights into the tension between tradition and modernity, highlighting the African focus on communality and holistic experiences compared to the Western individualistic approach (Chigangaidze, 2023; Claassens & O'Regan, 2021). Urbanisation has resulted in a decline in extended families and a rise in nuclear families and corresponding marital stress (Kgadima & Leburu, 2023), while globalisation has weakened core values of customary marriage, highlighting the need for indigenous counselling approaches (Possa-Mogoera, 2023). Amaefula (2021) stresses the importance of balancing traditional practices with contemporary influences to maintain the benefits of customary marriage and cultural integrity.

The Afrocentric perspective is essential for the social sciences in South Africa, advocating for marginalised African culture-based epistemologies (Amaefula, 2021). It supports the development of theories rooted in African indigenous culture, enhancing social workers' understanding of community values and needs. This perspective stresses the significance of African cultural knowledge in addressing the psychological, intellectual, spiritual and emotional needs of indigenous people. Sibani (2018) notes that Western therapeutic methods often overlook these needs because of their individualistic focus. Huizenga (2018) calls for decolonising social work to counter the impacts of colonisation, as many interventions are shaped by Western theories that devalue African traditions (Chigangaidze, 2023; Moeti et al., 2017). Claassens and O'Regan (2021) ask how universal social work ideals can be adapted to local contexts. Cultural assimilation can significantly alter language, values and ethnic identity (Parada, 2022; Sodi et al., 2021). Indigenising social work practice offers culturally relevant solutions to local challenges, while maintaining universal social work values (Mogorosi & Thabede, 2018).

CONSTRUCTS OF CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE

Customary marriages in South Africa, defined by the Recognition of Customary Marriages Amendment Act (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2021), are based on indigenous African customary law and often involve rituals like bride wealth payment. While these marriages reflect diverse global cultural traditions, they face challenges in reconciling cultural heritage with modern legal frameworks (Kgadima & Leburu, 2023). In South Asia, customary marriages strengthen community bonds, but also present difficulties in protecting women's rights. Similarly, in Ghana and Nigeria, customary marriage practices underscore tradition and community approval, with bride wealth playing a central role. Current discussions focus on

aligning these practices with human rights standards, particularly concerning women's rights (Kgadima & Leburu, 2023).

In Southern Africa, including South Africa, Lesotho and Botswana, customary marriages are legally recognised and underline community approval and bride wealth. Despite this, issues of gender equality and domestic violence persist (Lawson et al., 2020). These marriages typically require family consent, involve traditional rituals, and prioritise family unity, procreation and communal harmony. Polygamy is viewed as a way to address gender imbalances and ensure generational continuity, with male heirs considered vital for the lineage. There is a decline in cultural marital arrangement practices such as the seed-raising custom (a posthumous marriage in which a wife is married in the name of a deceased man who died unmarried and without children, so that children can be born in his name to continue his lineage and inherit his property), the levirate custom (where a male relative of a deceased man marries the widow to have a child who is considered the rightful heir, especially when the deceased left no sons), and the surrogate custom (where a male relative of a deceased man enters into a relationship with the widow to have additional children for the deceased, even when he already had a male heir). But the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act in South Africa formalises these unions by requiring consent and registration, without invalidating those that are unregistered (RSA, 1998; Tlharhani & Olehile, 2021).

CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE STRESSORS

Marital stressors in customary marriages mainly stem from entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural practices that undermine women's rights (Possa-Mogoera, 2023). Women are often seen as perpetual minors under male guardianship, limiting their status and property ownership (Morudu, 2019). Widows may face forced remarriage and extended mourning rituals, while marriage enrichment sessions can inadvertently reinforce gender inequality (Morudu, 2019). Domestic violence remains underreported because of cultural stigmas, highlighting the persistence of patriarchal structures despite gender equality initiatives. Practices such as bride-price further entrench these inequities. Moreover, modernisation and technology are reshaping traditional practices, causing a disconnect between younger generations and their cultural heritage. The lack of cultural education in schools worsens this issue, leaving individuals ill equipped to navigate their customary roles and jeopardising the wellbeing of women and children affected by these customs (Morudu, 2019).

Gender inequality is a significant issue in customary marriages, compounded by broader socio-economic challenges. Manthwa (2023) identifies economic instability, changing gender roles, and extended family interference as key stressors affecting Sotho marriages, particularly intensifying difficulties for women and children where traditional expectations limit individual growth (Morudu, 2019). Children face pressure to meet familial obligations, which can hinder achieving their educational goals and cause emotional distress (Morudu, 2019). Moreover, modernisation and technology create tensions with customary practices, resulting in generational rifts and a decline in the transmission of cultural knowledge (Manthwa, 2023). The lack of cultural education in schools further complicates these issues, making it difficult for individuals to reconcile traditional values with modern societal norms (Manthwa, 2023). This interplay of dynamics highlights that, while patriarchal norms are a critical concern, the

challenges in customary marriages are multifaceted, necessitating a holistic understanding of socio-cultural, economic and educational factors (Morudu, 2019).

CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE STRENGTHS

Marital strengths in African customary marriages are rooted in principles of complementarity, spirituality and community support (Manthwa, 2023). Couples address challenges through their complementary roles, with each partner contributing to the relationship's stability. African spirituality offers purpose and emotional support, enhancing marital bonds. Families provide economic and moral support during crises, fostering cultural reciprocity and community solidarity (Manthwa, 2023). In this framework, extended kin care for children emphasises communal responsibility and the importance of familial ties. This interconnectedness ensures that children grow up in a supportive network, benefiting from the shared wisdom and resources of the broader family unit. Additionally, the humanistic values of customary marriages such as peace, harmony and mutual reciprocity, create a nurturing environment that fosters personal and collective growth (Morudu, 2019).

Conflict resolution in customary marriages typically involves mediation and customary tribunals, stressing restorative justice over punitive measures (Manthwa, 2023). This culturally relevant and cost-effective approach allows families to resolve disputes in accordance with their values and traditions. Customary marriage laws promote equal status among partners, fostering fairness within the union. Traditional healers also play a role by providing affordable, culturally relevant healthcare that enhances family wellbeing (Morudu, 2019). In Sotho customary marriages, strong family support, clearly defined roles and adherence to cultural values are significant (Morudu, 2019). Indigenous counselling practices are particularly effective for conflict resolution and maintaining marital harmony, as they are tailored to the Sotho people's unique cultural context (Morudu, 2019). This holistic approach underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage while addressing contemporary challenges in marital relationships.

INDIGENOUS MARITAL COUNSELLING

Indigenous marriage counselling, which prioritises community and cultural context, has been shown to be more effective than Western methods for addressing the deep-rooted issues faced by African-oriented couples (Baskin, 2022). This culturally relevant approach recognises the unique dynamics and values of indigenous communities, allowing counsellors to tailor their strategies to couples' specific needs and beliefs (Baskin, 2022). By stressing traditional practices and the importance of family and community involvement, indigenous counselling fosters meaningful dialogue and conflict resolution (Baskin, 2022). It helps preserve cultural heritage, while taking into account broader social and familial contexts, ensuring the counselling process aligns with clients' lived experiences. In the Sotho context, this alignment enhances the effectiveness of counselling interventions, making them more relatable for couples facing marital challenges. Moreover, the benefits of indigenous marriage counselling extend beyond individual couples, promoting cultural continuity and community resilience (Morudu, 2019).

In the Sotho community, where strong familial ties and collective responsibility are vital, indigenous counselling reinforces these values by involving extended family members in the therapeutic process. This participation fosters shared responsibility in nurturing relationships and strengthens family bonds (Baskin, 2022). The communal approach creates a supportive environment and integrates spiritual and holistic practices to address clients' emotional, psychological and social needs comprehensively (Morudu, 2019). However, challenges may arise, such as concerns over confidentiality and personal space, which can hinder open dialogue. Furthermore, modern life and individualistic perspectives may undermine traditional practices, and not all clients, especially younger generations, may connect with the spiritual aspects of counselling. This underscores the need for indigenous counselling to adapt and innovate to remain relevant in a changing context.

This study explored Sotho couples' views on customary marriage, examining their marital challenges and strengths from an indigenous African perspective. It highlighted the significance of indigenous counselling in promoting healthier relationships and maintaining cultural identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is rooted in the theory of social constructionism, which suggests that individuals are shaped by their socio-cultural contexts through language and socialisation (Hao, 2024). It highlights how norms and values influence perceptions of customary marriage among Sotho couples in South Africa, requiring an understanding of historical and social contexts in a post-colonial setting. By examining cultural meanings and traditions, the research reveals how these factors affect couples' responses to marital stressors and emphasises the importance of language in expressing shared meanings. The study advocates for indigenous marital counselling that respects cultural practices and calls for a critical analysis of traditional practices in response to the historical marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems. Ultimately, it places Sotho couples' narratives within broader socio-political frameworks, stressing the need for culturally relevant support systems aligned with community values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The guiding research question for the study was: What are the Sotho couples' narratives of customary marriage, marital stressors, strengths, and the value of indigenous marital counselling? The study aimed to deepen understanding of how Sotho couples perceive customary marriage, marital stressors, strengths and the significance of marital counselling. Specifically, the research objectives focused on exploring and analysing the significance of Sotho couples' narratives related to these constructs.

A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the narratives of Sotho couples regarding customary marriage. This method allowed participants to share their experiences and focuses on how people construct their world (Marlow, 2023), offering valuable insights into their cultural context and enriching the understanding of customary marriage in rural Sotho community.

The study utilised narrative inquiry as its research design, ensuring a logical connection between its purpose and methodology. Narrative inquiry involves crafting stories from life experiences, allowing individuals to reflect on significant events in a coherent manner (Mertova & Webster, 2019). This process helps participants make sense of their experiences and engage in meaning-making (Visser et al., 2019). The research specifically examined how participants understood constructs related to marriage, including marital stressors, strengths, and the role of indigenous counselling within their natural context.

The population from which the sample for this study was drawn comprised 10 men and 10 women, each of whom had been in customary marriages for over twenty years, living in a rural community in the Eastern Cape. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. The sample size of 20 was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, at which point no new themes emerged from the data.

Data collection for the study involved two one-hour focus group interviews, one with 10 men and another with 10 women. The groups were separated by gender to honour cultural traditions and enhance participants' feeling comfortable in discussing sensitive topics, as many individuals prefer same-gender settings (Shah, 2024). A male researcher facilitated the male focus group interview, while a female fieldworker experienced in qualitative interviewing led the female focus group interview, fostering trust and an understanding of gender dynamics. This approach respected cultural sensitivities and helped to improve data quality. The study undertook data triangulation by comparing insights from both groups and field notes, validating findings through gender-based differences and similarities, and capturing diverse perspectives. Conducted in Sesotho in a rural community in Tlokoeng (Mount Fletcher), the interviews were guided by key questions, including: "What is your understanding of marriage from a Sotho perspective?" "What causes conflict in a marriage, and what keeps it together?" "How do you understand marital counselling from a Sotho perspective?" and "What do you value about indigenous marital counselling?"

Once the data were generated, relationships and patterns were uncovered through detailed thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). The researcher transcribed and coded the audio-recorded focus group interviews, identifying significant words and phrases, which were then organised into broader themes and subthemes. An independent coder was involved to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. The coder reviewed the transcripts and collaborated with the researcher to validate the identified themes, minimising bias and ensuring the credibility of the findings. This collaborative approach was essential for capturing the complexity of the participants' experiences, while maintaining a comprehensive understanding of their narratives.

The study ensured trustworthiness by addressing the key qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and reflexivity, each supported by specific strategies. Credibility was supported through triangulation of interviews, field notes and participant narratives, along with prolonged engagement to build rapport. Independent analysis by a second coder enhanced both credibility and confirmability. Transferability was ensured by providing detailed demographic and contextual information. Dependability was maintained through consistent data-collection procedures, reflective memos and coder review.

Confirmability was strengthened by an audit trail, verbatim transcripts and peer debriefing to reduce bias. Reflexivity was upheld through journaling, supervision and selecting a less familiar research setting to minimise assumptions and ensure ethical practice. While self-reported data may involve social desirability or recall bias, this risk was reduced through gender-specific focus groups, respectful facilitation and sustained engagement. These methods promoted openness and trust, allowing for rich, culturally grounded insights into Basotho customary marriage.

Ethical considerations included obtaining permission from local leaders, receiving ethical clearance (H17-HEA-SDP-004) from the registering institution, and upholding informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and ensuring participants' wellbeing (Marlow, 2023). Participants were offered free debriefing services, if needed. Results were presented objectively to participants, ensuring integrity in reporting.

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

The demographic details of the participants from the two separate focus groups are illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Demographics of male focus group participants

Participant	Age	Year of marriage	Number of years in customary marriage
MP1	76	1975	43
MP2	77	1967	51
MP3	55	1988	30
MP4	64	1978	40
MP5	71	1976	42
MP6	72	1967	51
MP7	64	1978	40
MP8	60	1979	39
MP9	64	1979	39
MP10	63	1974	43

The table above indicates that the average age of male participants was 67 years, with ages ranging from 55 to 77. According to lifespan development theory (Gale et al., 2023), these participants were in the middle to late adulthood phase. Furthermore, with an average of 42 years of marriage, their extensive experience underscored their significant life experiences and perspectives on marriage.

Table 2: Demographics of female focus group participants

Participant	Age	Year of marriage	Number of years in customary marriage
FP 1	87	1960	58
FP 2	40	1997	21
FP 3	44	1996	22
FP 4	43	1995	23
FP 5	66	1983	35
FP 6	76	1969	49
FP 7	59	1976	42
FP 8	84	1958	60
FP 9	80	1952	66
FP10	48	1996	22

The table above illustrates that the average age of female participants was 63 years, with ages ranging from 43 to 87. According to lifespan development theory (Gale et al., 2023), these participants were in the middle to late adulthood phase of life. With an average of 40 years of marriage, they have a significant history of married life to reflect upon. Similar studies, such as one by Zhao et al. (2022), report comparable age distributions and highlight the importance of marital experience in shaping perspectives during this life stage.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Thematic data analysis in this study identified four main themes, each with multiple subthemes. These are supported by participant quotes, gender-specific insights where applicable, and reference to relevant literature. The findings are based on two separate focus groups, one comprising 10 elderly men and the other 10 elderly women. The presentation captures varied perspectives, areas of consensus and divergence, and critically engages the findings with existing knowledge.

Theme 1: Constructs of customary marriage

This theme explores how elderly Basotho men and women conceptualise and experience customary marriage. It highlights the multidimensional nature of customary marriage as a cultural repository, spiritual contract, familial alliance, legal institution, and marker of personal and communal status. Each subtheme unpacks these dimensions while illuminating gendered interpretations and shifts across generational lines. The discussions reveal that while there is a shared cultural understanding of marriage as a deeply rooted social institution, men and women often prioritise different aspects based on their roles, responsibilities and lived experiences within marriage.

Subtheme 1.1: Customary marriage is a treasure of cultural values and a means of preserving ancestral legacies

This subtheme delves into the perception of customary marriage as a vessel for transmitting cultural values and ancestral wisdom. For the majority of participants, marriage was portrayed as more than a union between two individuals, as it is a sacred process through which indigenous knowledge, rituals and spiritual beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next. This view is underpinned by the belief that marriage ceremonies reconnect the living with their ancestors, and that the success of the marriage is closely tied to how well ancestral customs are observed. Both male and female participants expressed this belief, although with slightly different emphases. Among the 20 participants, 18 (9 males and 9 females) identified customary marriage as a vital channel for preserving cultural identity. The majority described the act of honouring ancestors during marital rites as an obligation rather than a preference, with implications for spiritual harmony and family prosperity. Participants explained that ancestral blessings are seen as foundational to a stable, fertile and harmonious marriage. Failure to observe these customs, they noted, may result in misfortunes such as childlessness, persistent marital conflict or illness.

Through marriage, we safeguard our cultural values, preserve our traditions, honour our ancestors' wishes and customs, and pass on our treasured indigenous knowledge to future generations. (FP3)

Acknowledging ancestors during marriage negotiations is fundamental; failing to do so may result in misfortunes, sterility, marital instability, and unnecessary conflicts... the bride or her child is renamed after respected ancestors. (MP6)

Marriage signifies the renewal of the family and the remembrance of ancestors known for their honourable deeds. (FP10)

These findings are affirmed in literature. Msuya (2019) emphasises the centrality of ancestral reverence in African marital systems, where rituals are designed to acknowledge the unseen presence of familial spirits. Sajed and Seidel (2023) argue that such rituals are instrumental in maintaining community cohesion and cultural continuity. Similarly, Jamilah et al. (2025) and Rich et al. (2022) emphasise that ancestral rituals fulfil both symbolic and practical roles by reinforcing family bonds, validating marital unions and upholding traditional belief systems. Interestingly, two younger-spirited female participants in the elderly group expressed a more symbolic interpretation of ancestral rituals, suggesting a generational shift in the internalisation of these traditions. While they did not reject the importance of ancestral respect, they suggested that younger generations may interpret these obligations more flexibly. This indicates that while the reverence for ancestors remains strong among the elderly, the evolving interpretation of these practices may influence how future generations engage with marriage customs.

Subtheme 1.2: Customary marriage is a covenant between two families

This subtheme explores the understanding of customary marriage as an alliance not only between two individuals but also between their respective families. Participants repeatedly emphasised that the collective nature of marriage is one that is initiated, negotiated and sustained by family elders. This perception foregrounds marriage as a covenant, reinforced by extended kinship structures, where both families carry moral, cultural and sometimes spiritual responsibilities for the success of the union. Such practices are deeply embedded in Basotho cosmology and social organisation. Sixteen participants (9 males and 7 females) explained that marriage is initiated through a consultative process involving family elders who negotiate the terms, resolve disputes and provide guidance. For male participants, the covenant was often interpreted through the lens of lineage protection and generational continuity, while female participants foregrounded emotional and relational dimensions, such as in-law relationships and mutual support systems.

Customary marriage practices require individuals to consult their parents ... marriage signifies the beginning of new life ... protecting the generational family and clan name from extinction. (FP9)

Marriage signifies the expansion of the extended family and comes with the expectation that the new couple will have children. (MP4)

Customary marriage does not limit a man to one partner ... This agreement is chiefly negotiated by the family elders. (FP3)

The male voices in this subtheme tend to uphold polygamy as a legitimate family strategy for lineage expansion, and four male participants openly endorsed polygamous arrangements. Two female participants also expressed acceptance of polygamy, provided it was entered into with mutual consent and fairness. However, three female participants strongly questioned the emotional toll of polygamy on women, especially in relation to feelings of neglect, competition and unequal attention from husbands. These interpretations reflect Dube's (2021) findings, which reveal African marriages as communal contracts where elders act as moral gatekeepers. Dombo (2023) also notes that these intergenerational negotiations reinforce extended kinship systems and uphold traditional values. However, as some participants noted, patriarchal dynamics can sometimes overshadow women's voices, especially in negotiations where men dominate the decision-making process. This highlights the need to engage critically with how family-based covenants are interpreted in ways that balance tradition with respect for gender equity.

Subtheme 1.3: Customary marriage creates a promise of procreation

This subtheme highlights how procreation is framed as a core expectation and obligation within customary marriage. Participants described childbearing not only as a personal or familial goal, but as a cultural imperative linked to ancestral honour, lineage continuity and spiritual fulfilment. However, while both genders recognised the importance of children, men and women interpreted and experienced the responsibility of procreation in notably different ways. Seventeen participants (9 males and 8 females) reflected on procreation as central to the

meaning of marriage. Male participants viewed children as the evidence of a successful union and a way of honouring both the living and the dead. For them, the absence of children was often equated with spiritual imbalance or ancestral disapproval. In contrast, female participants emphasised the emotional and social burdens that accompany the expectation to bear children, especially when fertility challenges arise:

Marriage is seen as a calling for every woman to start and expand a new family in distant lands... (FP5)

This proverb reflects a common cultural understanding that women, upon marriage, are integrated into their husband's lineage. Their identity, role, and even burial rights are absorbed into the husband's family. Msuya (2019) supports this view, arguing that fertility in African marriages is more than biological as it is a sign of spiritual and social order. Sajed and Seidel (2023) add that children are symbolic carriers of cultural legacy and familial destiny. Despite shared recognition of the importance of children, female participants raised concerns over being reduced to their reproductive functions. Some expressed fears of stigma, rejection and spiritual blame when facing fertility challenges. These gendered tensions reflect not only cultural priorities, but also deeper inequalities in how reproductive responsibilities are distributed and perceived.

Subtheme 1.4: Customary marriage builds a community based on the principles of humanism

This subtheme explores how participants view marriage as an institution that nurtures communal values such as humanity, mutual support and reciprocity. According to participants, customary marriage is not merely about romantic partnership, but is deeply embedded in the moral and ethical fabric of the community. Marriage is seen as an entry point into full societal participation and as a foundation for building interconnected lives grounded in the principle of humanism. Twelve participants (6 males and 6 females) spoke to this communal dimension, identifying respect for others, interdependence and social responsibility as key attributes of marital life. These values are expected to be modelled by the couple and shared with their children, extended families and broader community.

Sotho marital life is based on the philosophy of humanism and is reinforced and sustained by community principles of mutual respect, reciprocity, and collectivism. (MP5)

Marriage signifies that both the man and woman have matured enough to take on the role of building a community grounded in the principle of humanity. (MP5)

Sodi et al. (2021) frame African marriage systems as expressions of *ubuntu* where identity is defined through relationships with others. Richey (2022) extends this by arguing that such marriages function as cultural and spiritual institutions that sustain community life. However, some female participants noted that while humanistic values were ideal, the burden of enacting them often fell disproportionately on women. Three women shared that they were expected to show unconditional respect to in-laws and bear the emotional weight of sustaining family harmony. This nuanced gendered experience reveals the disjuncture between communal ideals and lived realities for women in marriage.

Subtheme 1.5: The bride price confers legal recognition in customary marriages

This subtheme explores how participants understand bride price as the legal and cultural mechanism through which customary marriages are formalised and recognised. The bride price is described not merely as a material transaction, but as a deeply symbolic ritual signifying respect, honour and the integration of the bride into her husband's lineage. Participants indicated that the completion of the bride price negotiations confers full legal status on the marriage and determines the legitimacy and social identity of the children born from the union. While both men and women supported this understanding, their interpretations reflected distinct priorities: men emphasised familial unity and tradition, whereas women often focused on the legal implications for their children and their own sense of belonging within the marital family. All 20 participants (10 males and 10 females) agreed that the bride price was essential in establishing the authenticity and validity of a customary marriage. The completion of this process was perceived as a form of legal certification, especially in communities where statutory marriage registration is not prioritised. For male participants, paying the bride price demonstrated commitment, honour and responsibility, while female participants explained that without the bride price, they and their children remained attached to their natal families, creating both spiritual and social tension:

The bride price signifies the start of a new union ... It is a sign of respect and commitment.
(FP4)

Until the bride price is settled, my children are still seen as belonging to my family ... Without it, the community does not recognise the union. (FP2)

This interpretation is reinforced by Claassens and O'Regan (2021), who argue that bride price represents more than symbolic value, as it is an essential cultural and quasi-legal instrument that confers social and reproductive legitimacy. Dube (2021) echoes this by highlighting the significance of bride wealth in sealing inter-familial agreements and granting children full belonging in the patrilineal line. Rich et al. (2022) further assert that the bride price ceremonies are often public affirmations of unity and mutual respect between families. Despite this consensus, two younger female participants raised concerns about delayed or incomplete the bride price payments, particularly the emotional and legal ambiguity this creates. They highlighted that in some cases families continue to dispute the status of the marriage until full payment is made, which affects not only the woman's recognition as a wife but also the child's surname, inheritance rights and social belonging. These voices expose the tension between cultural expectations and socioeconomic realities, and suggest that while the bride price retains deep meaning, there is a need for evolving practices that protect women's and children's rights within this framework.

Subtheme 1.6: Customary marriage establishes social status

This subtheme discusses the widespread belief that marriage enhances a person's social standing, maturity and respectability within the community. Participants explained that marriage is regarded as a rite of passage into adulthood, conferring identity, responsibility and prestige, especially for men. For women, marriage was seen as fulfilling societal expectations of womanhood particularly around nurturing, caregiving and child-rearing. These status

markers were not only affirmed by family members, but also reinforced through broader communal evaluations. While both male and female participants affirmed the status-enhancing nature of marriage, some women challenged the assumption that personal worth should depend on marital status alone. Eighteen participants (10 males and 8 females) agreed that being married brings public validation and community honour. For men, it represented a transition into adulthood, reliability and leadership. For women, it signified their successful fulfilment of traditional roles and responsibilities. Some participants noted that those who remained unmarried into older age were sometimes ridiculed or treated with suspicion.

Remaining single can attract ridicule from both relatives and the community. (FP1)

Marriage is a way to gain or enhance social status within the family and community. (MP10)

Marriage restores a man's dignity ... he is seen as more dependable, trustworthy and accountable. (FP5)

These sentiments align with the findings of Huizenga (2018), who notes that in many African cultures marital status is a social currency, one that grants access to community leadership and social responsibility, particularly for men. Claassens and O'Regan (2021) also link the bride price to an individual's recognition in the community, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Sodi et al. (2021) argue that marriage is a key marker of personhood and full societal membership in African worldviews. However, two female participants contested these norms, questioning whether marriage should be the only or primary avenue for gaining respect and dignity. One remarked that a woman's social value should not be judged by her marital status alone but by her character, achievements and contributions to community wellbeing. These views point to a gradual shift in values among some women, reflecting broader debates about gender, autonomy and changing definitions of success in contemporary society.

Theme 2: Customary marriage stressors

This theme explores the growing pressures on customary marriage in the Basotho community, arising from intersecting influences such as modernisation, Westernisation, patriarchal dominance, societal demands and global gender transformation policies. Participants' narratives revealed that while customary marriage remains a respected institution, it is increasingly strained by shifting cultural values, technological influence, generational change and legal-political reforms. These stressors not only impact on marital stability, but also highlight tensions between tradition and evolving social norms. Gender emerged as a key axis along which experiences diverge, as men often invoke communal responsibility and elder authority, whereas women express concern about discrimination, marginalisation and emotional burden. The subthemes below outline the various forms these stressors can take.

Subtheme 2.1: Modern ways of thinking and Westernisation have a stressful effect on customary marriage

This subtheme interrogates how the encroachment of modern ideologies, Western cultural values and technological advances are weakening the foundations of customary marriage. Participants reflected on how the rise of individualism, nuclear family structures and secular governance disrupt traditional systems that previously upheld marital customs. Elders' roles have been diminished and couples increasingly rely on media, mobile devices and digital platforms for guidance. Social work education was also critiqued for its lack of cultural grounding, contributing to inadequate intervention in marital crises within indigenous communities. Fourteen participants (6 men, 8 women) described these changes as destabilising. They lamented the erosion of traditional authority, the loss of intergenerational mentorship and the adoption of foreign practices ill-suited to African family dynamics. Women, in particular, stressed that Western therapeutic methods often fail to address their lived realities, while men were more concerned about loss of respect for elders and diminished communal rituals:

The adoption of new democratic governance in South Africa has fostered cultural and religious diversity, undermining traditional customs and values that enrich customary marriage. (MP10)

A lack of cultural knowledge can hinder conflict resolution in customary marriages. Some couples in this community have experienced separation and divorce because social workers were unable to intervene effectively. (MP2)

The curriculum at higher education institutions inadequately reflects African indigenous cultures, leading many graduates lack respect for or awareness of these cultures. (MP1)

Challenges to the preservation of customary marriage include rapid urbanisation and the influence of foreign culture through technology and Western media. (MP3)

Most couples now rely on their phones and televisions for guidance instead of seeking wisdom from the elderly when facing marital challenges. (MP4)

These reflections echo Dombo (2023), who discusses the marginalisation of indigenous epistemologies in multicultural societies. Makhanya (2023) similarly critiques the way Westernisation prioritises individual autonomy over communal obligations, distorting African value systems. This subtheme also raises concerns about cultural literacy among professionals. The lack of indigenous knowledge in social work curricula and policy reflects a broader issue of cultural erasure and misalignment of support systems. The gendered aspect is also clear, for while men grieve the loss of customary authority, women bear the psychosocial consequences of culturally incompatible interventions.

Subtheme 2.2: The couple has limited decision-making powers in customary law

This subtheme focuses on how the centralised authority of elders and male dominance within customary marriage constrains couples' autonomy. Participants revealed that decisions about finance, family planning and conflict resolution are often taken out of the couple's hands, especially by elders who are seen as custodians of tradition. This limited involvement hinders

marital independence and perpetuates power imbalances particularly disadvantaging women, whose input is frequently marginalised. Sixteen participants (9 men, 7 women) acknowledged that couples, especially women, are disempowered within the traditional marriage structure. Elder men often have the final say, and younger spouses are pressured to conform to decisions rooted in communal rather than personal logic. Men in the study tended to defend this tradition as necessary for order, while women critiqued the suppression of their agency and autonomy:

In customary marriage, elders typically make decisions for the couple rather than allowing them to find solutions to their marital problems on their own. (MP8)

In customary marriage, men often dominate decision-making processes, overpowering women in most aspects of marital life. (FP3)

These insights align with Dombo (2023), who argues that entrenched patriarchal dynamics under customary law often prevent equitable participation in marital decisions. Rich et al. (2022) point out that decision-making authority usually rests with men or male elders, leading to the social and economic dependence of women. Medie (2022) critiques the way customary frameworks stress collective responsibility, often overriding the personal preferences of the marital unit. This subtheme also illuminates differing priorities as male participants often sought validation through traditional hierarchies and elder endorsement, whereas female participants stressed emotional safety, mutual respect and the desire to assert their voices in decision-making. These differences underscore the need to revisit customary practices through a gender-inclusive lens that respects both tradition and evolving human rights norms.

Subtheme 2.3: Women and children face discrimination

This subtheme reveals how customary marriage perpetuates systemic inequalities for women and children, placing them in subordinate positions under male authority. Participants spoke of how women are denied equal decision-making power, face discriminatory cultural expectations in mourning rituals, naming customs and parenting responsibilities. In cases of childlessness or behavioural issues in children, blame is disproportionately placed on women. Widows also face harsher treatment than widowers, and children are frequently excluded from decisions affecting their wellbeing. Seventeen participants (8 men, 9 women) reflected on these discriminatory dynamics. Women shared deeply personal accounts of being blamed for infertility, overburdened with caregiving duties and being treated as lifelong dependents, first of their fathers and then of their husbands, and later of their in-laws. Male participants mostly viewed these issues through a traditionalist lens, maintaining that cultural practices serve communal order, although one acknowledged gender inequality:

Family decision-making is often unequal, predominantly influenced by the husband, who may not consult or consider his wife's views. Customary law regards women as incapable of independence and decision-making, treating them as perpetual minors. (MP4)

A challenge in customary marriage is that if a couple cannot have children, the community pressures the husband to marry another woman for procreation ... while the mother is blamed for a child's failures. (FP1)

Customary law discriminates between men and women ... a bride must use alternative names for her husband's elders ... a widow must mourn for a year, but a widower mourns only briefly. (FP10)

Children are not viewed as key contributors ... When parents separate, children are not allowed to choose which parent to stay with, especially if the bride price was paid. (MP7)

These findings mirror Makhanya's (2023) critique of the Children's Amendment Act (RSA, 2008) not being meaningfully implemented in contexts dominated by customary authority. Medie (2022) and Boterere and Maimela (2023) argue that women under customary systems are treated as property, often excluded from key decisions. Gendered mourning practices and child custody laws reinforce patriarchal privilege, and children's voices remain marginalised. This subtheme highlights a fundamental tension, for while cultural continuity is valued, there is growing awareness especially among women of the need to harmonise tradition with human rights. These experiences call for legal reforms, gender equity and participatory family processes that respect women and children's autonomy and dignity.

Subtheme 2.4: Societal needs are met at the expense of the couple

This subtheme discusses how the collectivistic values embedded in Basotho customary marriage often subordinate the emotional and personal needs of individual partners to broader community expectations. Participants shared that fulfilling prescribed cultural roles such as producing heirs, maintaining extended family ties or engaging in levirate marriage can override love, compatibility or personal autonomy. Men are often excused for infidelity through culturally normalised proverbs, while women are primarily valued for their fertility. These expectations can create profound emotional strain, particularly for women, whose worth is closely tied to reproductive ability and submission. Fifteen participants (7 male, 8 female) voiced concerns about how marital duties are defined and enforced to meet societal rather than personal needs. Women's testimonies illuminated how love, respect, and welfare are frequently side-lined, and their marriages become mechanisms for sustaining family unity rather than fulfilling romantic partnerships. Men were more likely to rationalise these expectations as essential for social cohesion, though some acknowledged the personal costs involved:

If my brother dies, I have to take care of his wife and children, even if we do not have any feelings for each other. (FP6)

Even with strong personal feelings, if our families are not united, our marriage could fail ... where a woman who can bear children is the most respected. (FP3).

Men are expected to spread around, that is just how it is, as reflected in the Basotho saying, 'A man is like a pumpkin, he spreads around,' which normalises cheating among married men.... (MP3)

The community's needs always come first; I often forget about my own wellbeing. Customary marriage is about fulfilling roles, not necessarily about love. (FP4)

The literature supports these perspectives. Scholars such as Sodi et al. (2021) and Dube (2021) argue that African marriage systems often prioritise extended family cohesion over the

emotional satisfaction of individual partners. The proverb cited by participants, “A man is like a pumpkin, he spreads around”, has been critiqued for reinforcing male infidelity and emotional neglect as culturally acceptable (Makhanya, 2023). Feminist readings of customary practices also warn against overemphasising communal harmony at the expense of women’s emotional security and agency (Tlharhani & Olehile, 2021). While communal support and shared identity are valuable, this subtheme reveals a pressing need for reinterpretation of customary expectations, especially those that normalise unequal emotional labour or invalidate love and consent. It also underscores how social cohesion, when rigidly enforced, can become a source of silent suffering, particularly for women in emotionally or relationally unfulfilling marriages.

Subtheme 2.5: Democratic and global policies on gender transformation impact the practice of customary law

This subtheme explores how the implementation of democratic values and global gender transformation policies challenges the traditional patriarchal norms embedded within customary marriage. Participants reflected on how increased awareness of human rights, particularly women’s rights, has empowered women to question inherited customs that compromise their dignity. However, these changes have not been uniformly welcomed. While some men acknowledged the growing contributions of women, others viewed such shifts as disrespectful or destabilising to long-standing roles and cultural authority. Fourteen participants (6 male, 8 female) engaged with the topic of gender transformation. Women expressed appreciation for democratic reforms and educational opportunities that expanded their agency, while some men resisted these developments, framing them as challenges to their leadership. Others, however, welcomed the idea of a balanced partnership:

Customary marriage often values men more than women. However, I believe that since we are all born of and raised by women, women are equally important... I support the saying, ‘Behind every successful man, there is a woman’. (FP8)

The era of freedom in South Africa has educated women about their human rights and empowered them to challenge traditional customs that undermine their dignity. However, men sometimes see women asserting their rights as disrespectful. (MP2)

This tension reflects findings by Msuya (2019), who notes that gender reforms often clash with cultural hierarchies, especially where patriarchy is sacralised. Parada (2022) and Boterere and Maimela (2023) document the resistance many men show toward gender-inclusive frameworks, often perceiving them as eroding traditional male authority. Nevertheless, the growing presence of women in leadership, education and advocacy spaces signals a paradigm shift that cannot be ignored. This subtheme highlights a critical crossroads between tradition and transformation. While there is resistance, there is also evidence of evolving consciousness among both genders. Some male participants voiced support for women’s empowerment, suggesting that customary marriage can be reimagined as a more equitable institution without losing cultural identity. This invites policymakers and community leaders to facilitate ongoing dialogue that bridges customary values with constitutional principles and human rights commitments.

Theme 3: Customary marriage strengths

This theme explores the enduring strengths embedded within Basotho customary marriage. Despite modern challenges and external pressures, the institution continues to function as a core cultural pillar that upholds ancestral teachings, unites families, reinforces intergenerational ties, and nurtures a sense of humanism and collective care. The insights gathered from both male and female participants, demonstrate a deep appreciation of how the institution contributes to the identity, stability and moral compass of the community. While expressions of these strengths differ slightly by gender, both groups revealed strong consensus about the value of customary marriage in preserving Basotho values and cultural continuity.

Subtheme 3.1: Customary marriage preserves and perpetuates ancestral teachings

This subtheme highlights the foundational role that customary marriage plays in transmitting ancestral teachings and cultural values across generations. According to the participants, the rituals, symbols and processes involved in customary marriage are more than symbolic; they represent a reaffirmation of one's spiritual identity and ancestral alignment. For both elderly male and female participants, the act of marrying within customary frameworks is a gesture of obedience to spiritual teachings, one that brings blessings, protection and community approval. Customary marriage is thus a living tradition that sustains indigenous knowledge systems and serves as a conduit for preserving the spiritual and moral codes handed down through generations. Eighteen participants (9 males, 9 females) expressed that marriage is more than a union between individuals, as it is a sacred act that strengthens the social order by linking the living with the ancestors and the unborn. This perspective reflects a deeply rooted belief that ancestral favour and familial wellbeing are tied to adherence to traditional marital rites:

The era of freedom in South Africa has educated women about their human rights and empowered them to challenge traditional customs that undermine their dignity. However, men sometimes see women asserting their rights as disrespectful. (MP2)

The Basotho community values marriage as a vital institution that shapes society. Events affecting a married couple or their children have repercussions for the community, making marriage a cherished institution. (MP8)

These participants' views are consistent with Whitehouse (2023), who describes marriage as a mechanism for ancestral continuity in Basotho cosmology. Sodi et al. (2021) emphasise that ancestral teachings embedded in marriage rites help regulate behaviour and preserve cultural coherence. Ceremonial acts such as naming children after ancestors and offering traditional sacrifices reinforce kinship ties and community unity. The findings confirm that customary marriage is a living spiritual heritage, ensuring intergenerational moral transmission.

Subtheme 3.2: Marriage unifies families, strengthens generational ties and fortifies the community's foundation

This subtheme reveals how customary marriage operates as a unifying force, promoting collective responsibility, social cohesion and moral accountability. Both male and female participants highlighted that marriage functions as a bridge between families and clans, reinforcing social obligations that ensure the welfare of the extended family and community at

large. Elderly women emphasised that marriage encourages cooperation among in-laws and teaches younger generations the value of respect and service. Elderly men added that it builds family legacies and curbs social ills through communal monitoring. Sixteen participants (8 males, 8 females) shared how customary marriage weaves individuals into a broader moral and relational fabric, discouraging selfish behaviour and adultery. They further noted that the involvement of the broader community in overseeing marriages ensures adherence to norms, thus preserving family honour and social trust.

The spirit of brotherly love and communal life in the community protects marriage from adultery. The community vigilantly monitors and prevents extramarital affairs, with severe punishments imposed by chiefs and their council on those caught in adulterous relationships with married individuals. (FP1)

Marriage brings our families together, creating bonds that last through generations and strengthen our community. (MP4)

When a couple marries, it is not just about them; it unites families and builds a stronger foundation for everyone. (MP6)

These findings align with those of Jennings et al. (2022) and Whitehouse (2023), who affirm the role of marriage in nation-building and fostering strong generational linkages. Sajed and Seidel (2023) further argue that customary marriage sustains shared values by formalising kinship structures that facilitate communal obligations. The role of chiefs and elders in regulating behaviour reflects a broader social system rooted in collectivism. This subtheme underscores that, within the Basotho worldview, marriage is not merely a private arrangement but a public institution tasked with nurturing unity and long-term social stability.

Subtheme 3.3: Humanistic principles create a harmonious environment that supports the collective needs of families

This subtheme explores how humanistic principles underpin customary marriage, creating inclusive support systems that sustain families in the face of adversity. According to participants, the emphasis on community, care and reciprocity ensures that no one is left behind, especially children, widows and the vulnerable. Unlike the nuclear family model, customary marriage prioritises extended familial networks, where caregiving is communal and roles are flexible. Participants also reflected on demographic realities such as the gender imbalance in South Africa, which has made polygamy a relevant response to the scarcity of male partners. Female participants in particular recognised that, under certain conditions, polygamy can provide economic and social stability for women who might otherwise be excluded from the institution of marriage. Male participants, while affirming the cultural logic of polygamy, also acknowledged its potential to build larger, mutually supportive households. Fifteen participants (7 males, 8 females) expressed that customary marriage fosters shared caregiving, protects children from social ills and creates moral expectations for collective care. The emotional safety net provided by this system is seen as essential for navigating contemporary challenges:

Recent statistics from Statistics South Africa show that there are more females than males, meaning some women may not find marriage partners. Thus, polygamous marriage allows men to have multiple wives, providing these women with the opportunity to marry. (FP1)

Today, many children and youth face crime, suffering, and poverty due to the focus of nuclear families on their own needs. In contrast, customary marriage promotes extended families that offer a home to all, regardless of blood or clan ties ... as customary law emphasises that everyone is a child of the same blood. (MP2)

The literature supports this view. Sajed and Seidel (2023) explain that African humanism pervades marriage practices, encouraging solidarity and compassion. Polygamy, though often contested, is understood in some contexts as a communal coping mechanism rather than mere male privilege (Whitehouse, 2023). By sharing responsibilities among co-wives and extended families, customary marriage helps reduce the burden on single caregivers and reinforces societal cohesion. This subtheme demonstrates that customary marriage is a cultural safety net. Far from being an outdated institution, it continues to offer solutions to emerging societal challenges by drawing on its humanistic foundation.

Theme 4: The value of indigenous marital counselling

This theme explores the vital role of indigenous marital counselling in the Basotho community, reflecting its cultural relevance, spiritual depth and social cohesion. The study reveals that marital counselling is not an isolated or individualised process, but rather a collective and holistic endeavour rooted in African humanism. Customary marital counselling strengthens the couple's bond by embedding it within extended kinship networks and spiritual worldviews, where elders, family members, chiefs and traditional healers collaboratively uphold cultural values and ensure harmony. Participants from both male and female focus groups highlighted that indigenous counselling provides culturally appropriate conflict resolution, marital preparation and psychosocial support that strengthen the foundation of customary marriage and communal wellbeing.

Subtheme 4.1: Understanding indigenous marital counselling

This subtheme provides insight into the conceptualisation of marital counselling within indigenous Basotho culture. Participants articulated that, in line with the values of African humanism, marital discord is not a private issue but a communal concern. Indigenous marital counselling is embedded in collective life and is aimed at restoring balance, reaffirming cultural values and preventing marital dissolution. The process involves multiple actors, especially elders, the bride's mother-in-law and community marriage experts, who bring intergenerational wisdom and practical strategies to address conflict. Chiefs and traditional healers are consulted in more complex cases, and guidance from ancestors is sought when conventional efforts fail. Both focus groups (10 elderly males and 10 elderly females) underscored that indigenous counselling integrates emotional, spiritual, social and cultural elements. Women particularly emphasised the role of the bride's mother-in-law in daily mediation, while men highlighted the role of chiefs and ancestral consultation in escalating cases.

A key aspect of the counselling process is the bride's mother-in-law, who acts as a mediator, fostering understanding and reconciliation between the couple and their families. If conflicts persist, chiefs and traditional healers may communicate with ancestors for guidance, as they are believed to embody cultural values and wisdom. (FP4)

In Basotho tradition, elders are highly respected for their purposeful and determined lives. They leverage their social skills and cultural wisdom to aid in marital reconciliation within the community. (MP6)

Indigenous counselling includes various community members, such as initiation schoolteachers, parents, elders, close relatives, marriage experts, traditional healers and chiefs with their councils. The bride's mother-in-law often serves as a mediator. If these efforts fail, chiefs and traditional healers consult ancestors, believed to restore cultural values and resolve marital conflicts. (MP4)

These insights are echoed by Mathebane and Sekudu (2018), who assert that indigenous counselling in African societies strengthens relational interdependence and enhances psychological wellbeing. Claassens and O'Regan (2021) similarly argue that the communal structure of African life nurtures belonging and accountability, making marital counselling a shared responsibility. Traditional healers add a spiritual dimension, promoting deeper healing and the reintegration of fractured relationships into the community structure. This subtheme illustrates that indigenous marital counselling is not merely interventionist, for it is preventative, restorative and grounded in cultural continuity.

Subtheme 4.2: Indigenous practices in marital preparation

This subtheme focuses on how Basotho cultural practices prepare youths for marriage through structured rites of passage, notably initiation schools and family guidance. Participants reported that initiation processes, beginning from puberty, educate boys and girls about gender roles, family responsibilities and moral expectations in preparation for marital life. Girls are mentored by aunts, who offer advice on body care, hygiene, sexual dignity and qualities to look for in a suitable husband. Boys receive cultural orientation on responsibility, protection and family honour. These preparatory stages culminated in family meetings to negotiate the bride price, often followed by rituals that invoke ancestral blessings for the couple. Both female and male participants (8 males, 8 females) strongly affirmed that these traditional teachings are vital for instilling discipline, mutual respect and a lifelong commitment to marriage. Women particularly appreciated the mentorship model, while men praised the structure offered by cultural rites.

The initiation school provides youth with enculturation programmes that incorporate the religious, social and cultural aspects of Basotho life. This exposure prepares them for the administration of customary marriage, equipping them for future marital responsibilities. (MP2)

Marriage preparation for girls in Basotho culture begins with puberty, when their aunts provide guidance and education ... They teach body care, hygiene and the dignified behaviour expected of women. (FP4)

Initiation schools prepare boys and girls during puberty, educating them about cultural identities and responsibilities ... while rituals include blessings from ancestors and community members, fostering support for the couple. (MP3)

Baskin (2022) and Huizenga (2018) support the idea that indigenous marriage preparation rituals foster cultural pride and intergenerational learning. These rites provide a spiritual and moral foundation that aligns marital expectations with cultural norms. The findings confirm that customary marriage is not entered into lightly; it is the outcome of deliberate and collective preparation processes that emphasise character formation and cultural commitment.

Subtheme 4.3: The benefits of indigenous marital counselling practices

This subtheme details the numerous benefits of indigenous marital counselling in promoting long-term stability, marital harmony and emotional wellbeing. Participants described indigenous counselling as a space where couples find support, wisdom and culturally congruent strategies for overcoming challenges. Counselling is seen not only as reactive but proactive, helping couples learn from the experiences of others and adjust their behaviour in line with community expectations. The process promotes a sense of solidarity, reinforces cultural identity, and provides spiritual and emotional healing. Most participants (9 males, 10 females) emphasised that indigenous counselling enhances mutual respect and reduces isolation. It is holistic and communal, rooted in humanistic principles and inclusive of both elder men and women as sources of insight. While men valued the rational strategies and authority of counsellors, women valued emotional support, wisdom sharing and the nurturing of hope through shared experiences:

Marriage is essential to community life, and in turn, marriage cannot fully exist without the community... The sharing of uplifting ideas and the transference of supportive marital enrichment skills can heal the depressed couple, strengthen them spiritually, and create an emotional connection... (FP5)

Indigenous marriage counselling enriches couples through feedback from seasoned community members... This collective approach addresses immediate issues while reinforcing cultural heritage.... (MP5)

It helps couples develop survival skills by learning from experienced pairs with similar challenges... encouraging couples to adopt new behaviours to improve their marital relationships. (MP7)

The literature by Huizenga (2018) and Baskin (2022) reinforces these findings, affirming that indigenous marital counselling strengthens resilience and cohesion. Huizenga notes that shared storytelling, ritual participation and spiritual guidance are key aspects of African indigenous therapy. The communal nature of counselling offers emotional security and promotes empathy by involving diverse perspectives. Overall, this subtheme confirms that indigenous marital counselling not only resolves conflicts, but also revitalises relationships and contributes to social wellness.

SUMMARY

The study reveals that Basotho customary marriage is a multifaceted institution grounded in cultural, spiritual, familial, legal and social aspects. It preserves ancestral legacies, unites families under elder guidance and emphasises procreation, though women often bear greater emotional burdens. While fostering communal humanistic values, women face unequal emotional responsibilities, and delays in bride price payments can negatively affect women's and children's rights. Marriage confers social status, especially for men, but some women contest this as the sole measure of worth. Modern pressures such as Westernisation, patriarchy and changing gender norms challenge traditional authority and limit couples' autonomy, particularly for women, prompting calls for gender-inclusive legal reforms. The institution's strengths lie in preserving ancestral teachings, promoting family unity and reinforcing communal bonds, with polygamy sometimes seen as a practical response to demographic realities. Indigenous marital counselling, involving elders and traditional healers, offers culturally appropriate conflict resolution, preparation and emotional support, fostering marital harmony, emotional wellbeing and social cohesion, vital for sustaining customary marriage and community health.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study highlights the complexity of Basotho customary marriage, emphasising women's emotional burdens and the importance of bride price for legal and social recognition. Modern challenges such as Westernisation, patriarchy and changing gender norms call for gender-inclusive adaptations of customary law that respect culture and promote equity. Supporting this requires social work and counselling education to incorporate indigenous knowledge and train practitioners in traditional marital counselling involving community elders and healers. Policymakers must recognise indigenous counselling, protect cultural marriage rights and address vulnerabilities affecting women and children. Future research using mixed methods and longitudinal studies can further explore these dynamics. Implementing these recommendations will enhance marital stability, cultural continuity and equitable practices within the Basotho community.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

While self-reported data may involve recall or social desirability bias, the study gained rich, first-hand insights through lived experiences. Its qualitative design and use of gender-separated, culturally grounded focus groups ensured depth and balanced perspectives. Basotho customary marriage is deeply embedded in cultural, spiritual, familial, legal and social aspects, preserving ancestral legacies and family unity. Women face unequal emotional burdens and challenges from delayed bride price payments, while modern pressures such as Westernisation and patriarchy threaten traditional authority and limit couples' autonomy, highlighting the need for gender-inclusive legal reforms. The findings inform social work practice by emphasising the integration of indigenous knowledge and communal values into education and training, equipping social work practitioners to use traditional marital counselling involving elders and healers for culturally sensitive support. Policymakers should formally recognise indigenous counselling, protect cultural marriage rights and address vulnerabilities affecting women and

children. These steps will improve interventions and policy frameworks that balance cultural preservation with gender equity. Overall, culturally grounded and gender-inclusive approaches are crucial for strengthening marital stability, sustaining cultural continuity, and promoting equity within the Basotho community amid changing social dynamics.

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