



RESEARCH PAPER

**Issues and Challenges in Political Engagement of Women in Pakistan:
A Narrative Study Of Women Activist Groups**

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze women's engagement in activism and political participation in Pakistan, with a particular focus on women who identify themselves as members of liberal or conservative groups. It explores their perspectives on Feminism and Nationalism, with religious affiliations as a significant factor. In the present study, employing a qualitative approach, 16 women participants aged 23 to 48 were interviewed. The study reveals distinct gender roles and feminist ideology perceptions between the two groups, closely intertwined with Islamic beliefs. Liberal women emphasize women's active public participation, challenging religious fundamentalism. In contrast, conservative women, identifying as nationalists and antifeminists, prefer women's involvement in the private sphere, embracing Islamic feminism less. Liberal respondents express dissatisfaction with Pakistan's sexist culture and challenges in advocating for gender equality. The study's implications extend to gender equality, female identity within nationalism, women's public involvement, and the impact of biases on challenging societal gender role expectations. In the context of feminism and nationalism, this study sheds light on the impact of religious beliefs on the viewpoints of socially and politically engaged women in Pakistan, offering valuable insights for academics and professionals.

Keywords: Pakistan, Political Participation, Women Activism

Introduction

In the Muslim world, the pursuit of nationalism is closely intertwined with the concept of masculinity. This phenomenon not only portrays men as protectors but also relegates women to subservient roles meant to praise and support them (Elias, 2008; Anjum et al., 2019). Pakistan's annual Independence Day celebration on the 14th of August serves as a prominent illustration of this connection. The auditory experiences during this celebration range from songs from the era of Pakistan-India conflicts, epitomized by Noor Jehan, to more recent motivational anthems dedicated to the Pakistani Army. However, some scholars express concerns about using this understanding of masculinity within nationalist studies (Elias, 2008).

Nagel (1998) extensively examines the intricate link between masculinity and nationalism. He asks a straightforward question: "What accounts for the notable divergence in objectives and priorities for the 'nation' between men and women?" Nagel posits a correlation between gender and nationalism, where women are systematically marginalized and excluded from active participation in shaping nations, particularly in frontline roles (Nagel, 1998, p. 242). This underrepresentation of women in nationalist

archives is attributed to the inherently masculine nature of nationalist endeavors characterized by masculine institutions, procedures, and activities (Nagel, 1998, p. 243).

Zia (2018) conducted a study in Pakistan to explore the significance of secular feminist activism within women's movements among Pakistan's working class. He argues that the Islamic piety exhibited by Muslim women does not challenge the existing political patriarchy, unlike the ideology of Islamic feminism. Liberals, especially feminists, advocate for secular liberty and aspire to bring revolutionary changes to the country, often challenging the prevailing dominance of Muslim males.

Literature Review

Nationalism embodies specific ideological objectives individuals aspire to achieve through collective efforts and is deeply ingrained in people's mindsets (Upreti, 2006). The construction of women as "Mothers of the Nation" underscores the centrality of gender and feminism in understanding religious nationalism, particularly in Muslim countries (Zia, 2018). Pakistani nationalism emerged after independence in 1947 during India's partition, driven by the belief in a unique Muslim identity based on Islam. Religion consistently underpins discussions about nationalism in Pakistan, with the ruling elite emphasizing religious and patriarchal foundations of national identity. After 1975, the Pakistani government increasingly propagated Islamization and fundamentalism for political motives (Khan, 2002; Upreti, 2006).

Enloe (1990) highlights the lack of enthusiasm among male theorists in exploring the interplay between nationalism and gender power relations. She argues that nationalist movements marginalize and relegate women to subordinate positions. Renan (1996) and other scholars warn that excessive focus on national identity can overlook inherent differences among individuals within the national community, perpetuating unequal conditions through nationalism. In conservative societies, socio-economic disadvantages often affect women who dissent from established cultural norms. These claims primarily benefit masculine citizens of the nation (Hobsbawm, 1990).

Khalid and Anjum (2019) cite research indicating that traditional caregiving practices and cultural honor values hinder women's empowerment in countries like Pakistan. The dominant cultural attachment observed in Pakistani society strengthens conservative ideologies and the conventional self-perception of Muslim identity as a symbol of integrity (Anjum et al., 2019).

Political Participation of Women and Religious Fundamentalism

This section examines debates around women's participation in politics, family reforms, and cultural interpretations of Islam (Anjum et al., 2017). Islam encompasses two stages of feminism, first challenging prevailing conservative forces and then impacting the political structure. The rise of conservative ideologies poses a significant challenge to gender equality for feminist collectives in minority Muslim communities (Hussain, 2007). Discussions about national identity often revolve around the regulation of women, especially within conservative political groups.

The Twentieth century witnessed significant transformations in feminist movements within the Muslim world. Although updated legislation on education, politics, and commerce has been implemented, progress in women's rights has not kept pace. Right-wing political groups have exploited women's identities, leading to discriminatory measures (Hussain, 2007). Leaders have strategically utilized women to promote their countries' progress. The process of "Islamisation" during General Zia's government emphasized women's seclusion in the domestic sphere (Cook, 2001).

Religious fundamentalism perpetuates conservative social values, xenophobia, and gender norms (Bermanis et al., 2004). It overlaps substantially with right-wing extremism in conventional societies. The emergence of militant Islam in Pakistan can be attributed to the influence of religious nationalism and fundamentalism, posing threats to global religious and political freedoms (Mohanty, 2009). The intertwining of religious affiliations is a prominent characteristic within nationalist fundamentalism, inadvertently contributing to the radicalization of Muslim youth (USIP, 2014).

Material and Methods

This research employed a qualitative approach, with in-depth interviews serving as the primary methodology. The overarching objective of this study was to gain insights into the perceptions and representations of gender roles, feminism, and nationalism among feminist and conservative female activists. The analysis of interview data adhered to the Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) method, as Creswell (2007) outlined.

Sampling

The study comprised 16 women aged 25 to 50 from Lahore, Pakistan. Participant selection was based on their societal roles and influence in shaping women's narratives. These participants represented diverse groups, including grassroots emancipatory movements, women-led voluntary organizations, cultural creators, performing artists, and those affiliated with religious and nationalist organizations, including Madrassas. The inclusion criteria of the individuals were required to possess at least four years of experience in their respective organizations. Participant recruitment utilized a snowball sampling method, following the approach proposed by Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015). This research drew upon the rich experiential knowledge of these women, aligning with the recommendations presented by Anjum et al. (2019).

Groups and Participants Detail

The groups and participants are enumerated in the table below:

Groups (G)	No. of Respondents (R)	Affiliation and Focus
G-1	8	Liberal group that promote women's economic independence, higher levels of education and skill development, innovative business creation, advocating for better health care, artistic and literary pursuits, and participation in nontraditional sports.
G-2	8	Conservative groups that identify as such and work to support Madrassas, women's education, religious education, and grassroots Islamic activism.

Data Collection

The interview methodology began with utilizing predetermined themes from a comprehensive review of pertinent literature, detailed in an accompanying appendix. The initial phase of the interviews encompassed introductions, followed by a series of progressively structured inquiries aligned with the overarching themes of ideologies, gender identities, feminism, nationalism, religion, and fundamentalism. Various communication modalities were employed, including in-person interviews, email correspondence, phone conversations, and messaging platforms. Participants were provided with comprehensive research information and subsequently gave their informed consent to participate. Some participants were granted access to specific questions in advance upon request. Interviews were conducted in English and Urdu, ranging from 40

minutes to one hour. The participants themselves chose interview locations. The process of generating composite descriptions involved the transcription of interviews and the incorporation of participant quotes, following the standards of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach adheres to established scholarly methodologies (Creswell, 2007; Ponterotto, 2006; Khalid & Anjum, 2019).

Findings

In the study's findings, participants engaged in discussions regarding gender roles, feminism, nationalism, and religious extremism in the Pakistani context. Utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), two main themes and various sub-themes were identified independently by two research assistants through two rounds of transcript review. This rigorous approach aimed to enhance result clarity and understanding. The research focused on understanding how Pakistani women perceive feminism and religious nationalism and how they employ coping mechanisms for social conflicts.

The study employed thematic grouping to comprehensively explore the intricate interplay of gender, feminism, nationalism, and religious fundamentalism in the lives of Pakistani women. Both participant groups, labeled as "liberal" and "conservative," exhibited shared and unique subthemes within each overarching topic. Direct quotations from participants are indicated in italics. To protect their anonymity, participants in each group were assigned numeric identification numbers from 1 to 9.

Islamic Fundamentalists and Feminist Perceptions in Pakistan

Every female member showed a strong personal dedication to advancing the objectives of their respective organizations, whether they aligned with liberal or conservative ideologies.

Gendered Stereotypes and Misogyny

Regarding gender roles and rights, there existed notable disparities in the perspectives and lived realities of women belonging to the two classifications, as mentioned earlier. For example, most women belonging to Group 1 believe that the concept of equality appears straightforward. However, it is accompanied by numerous obstacles that impede its comprehension and execution. As a respondent that:

I strongly oppose traditional gender norms assigning men as providers and women as caretakers. I've deviated from these roles, with my spouse assuming primary caregiving due to my demanding work hours. I aim for gender role equilibrium, where both men and women share professional and familial responsibilities. Gender roles detrimentally affect women worldwide, but some prioritize assertiveness over addressing societal constraints. I believe honor and respect are crucial for women's happiness, surpassing mere independence. (G-1, R-3)

In Islam, individuals are expected to show profound respect to their spouse. It's essential to understand factors contributing to Islam's misinterpretation, as this leads to a negative perception. I believe Islam embodies principles of peace and fulfillment surpassing other values. (G-2, R-9)

Divergent Perspectives on Feminism

The perspective of liberal individuals was that feminism plays a pivotal role in facilitating the attainment of social equality. Conversely, proponents of conservative civilizations maintained the belief that feminism is both deceptive and superfluous:

I understand feminism as a socio-political movement striving for gender equality in politics, economics, and society. As an advocate for gender equality, I assert that adopting feminism without recognizing women's global efforts and sacrifices is not aligned with my beliefs. (R-5, G-1)

The Quran and Sunnah provide a comprehensive framework for guiding the behavior of women, rendering it unnecessary to seek guidance from Western perspectives on the treatment of women. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the Quran, we must delve deeper into its teachings to ascertain our respective roles and obligations as women. (G-2, R-1)

Overcoming Barriers and Obedience

The above theme was noticed solely within the population of persons belonging to Group 1 who self-identify as women. Two main factors drove women to participate in liberal organizations: the advancement of their causes and the challenge to socio-cultural conventions that upheld inequalities:

I challenge societal expectations that push daughters-in-law to prioritize domestic roles over careers. Despite my qualifications, I relocated abroad with my family. After my marriage ended, I returned to Pakistan, empowering women by challenging norms. (R-1, G-1)

Several interviewees also emphasized the absence of state involvement in facilitating possibilities for women, impeding the advancement of feminist viewpoints.

The understanding of feminism, especially regarding economic disparities, is limited. Government neglect is clear. Women need more support as current structures favor men. The state promotes Islamic nationalism, deviating from universal equality. Critical examination of the state's position is vital for Pakistan's progress. We must avoid blind patriotism. (R-6, G-1)

Influence of Religion in Public and Private Spheres

Many participants within the cohort classified as Group 1 exhibited a predominantly impartial stance toward religion. Conversely, those belonging to Group 2 had a greater inclination towards endorsing the utilization of religion within the public sphere.

It's a fallacy to rely solely on religion for all aspects of life. Religion should be private, not in public. I once unquestionably followed teachings but faced opposition when pursuing a divorce on religious grounds. Changing religious views is tough, especially when overseen by entities like mullahs who control religious matters in our society. (R-7, G-1)

Islam governs many aspects of life, offering guidance for personal, family, and public matters. It can be a guiding force when understood comprehensively. (R-5, G-2)

Women's Role in Nation-Building

Many participants held the conviction that women substantially influence the formation and development of a nation.

From my observations, women play a vital role in society, often seen as the foundation. Educating women can educate a whole nation. Emancipating women is crucial for this purpose. (R-4, G-1)

The majority of interviews conducted with members of conservative organizations emphasized Islam as the sole means of preserving the nation:

Tableegh, preaching Islam, is a duty for all Muslims. Promoting piety in women is vital for our nation's well-being. Islamic education and devout marriages are crucial. Women play a major role in managing households and nurturing children, aiming for a strong Islamic society. (R-9, G-2)

A scholarly investigation into the interconnections among nationalism, feminism, gender, and Muslim identity.

In Pakistan, the blending of nationalism with religion is clear, evident even in the country's name. Religious beliefs have diverse interpretations, often isolating women to the private sphere. This religious aspect holds national importance in Pakistan. (R-9, G-1)

The Aurat March's inception was a crucial step in building awareness and resilience. Not all attendees share liberal feminist views, but it sparked discussions about women's rights in the public sphere, engaging individuals directly. (R-5, G-1)

Religious nationalism and the subjugation of women are intertwined in Pakistan. Right-wing nationalism encounters resistance. I strongly oppose a religious ideology marked by tyranny and emotional harm to women and marginalized groups. Society sees the nation as akin to a patriarchal family, emphasizing women's protection within predetermined gender roles. This curtails women's rights, which concerns me deeply. (R-8, G-1)

Social Conflict Management by Women

Those belonging to Group 1 exhibited a much higher utilization of coping mechanisms than those affiliated with the Conservative Group.

Seeking religious rationales

I support the conservative party Jamaat-i-Islami for its clear doctrine. I believe social hierarchies help civilizations progress. In an Islamic state, Sharia law should guide the legal system. The unity of Islam and the nation is positive. When nationalism conflicts with Islamic law, disengagement may be wise. (R-4, G-2)

Islam plays a vital role in my life, guiding all decisions, big and small. While some societal roles grant men higher prestige, women are considered superior in others, maintaining gender equality in their domains. In certain contexts, men protect women, while women's elevated status in childbirth surpasses fathers. (R-3, G-2)

Empowering and Recognize Marginalized Women

All women experienced a sense of contributing to something greater than themselves and having a meaningful impact on their community.

I feel empowered in my efforts to promote women's leadership. My actions raise awareness of their rights and opportunities. Fostering women's advancement is essential to combat workplace bias effectively. (R-9, G-1)

Investing in women is vital, especially in Pakistan, where they've faced disparities. Many young females have untapped potential, like Malala Yousufzai, due to male-favoring societal constructs. To progress and trust women's abilities, we must abandon these preconceptions. We provide a platform for women's advancement and development. (R-5, G-1)

Resilience Building and Mentorship

My community witnesses aggressive behavior, dehumanizing residents. Women are commodified and trafficked with apathy. I'm passionate about self-defense and joined a boxing club. Now, I teach boxing to female students in various regions to cultivate resilience. (R-2, G-2)

Women can excel with access to role models and effective mentorship. Our goal is to offer support and guidance, emphasizing help and mentorship. Resilient women's leadership benefits the community's well-being. (R-1, G-1)

Endorsing Humanism over Religion

Within the cohort of women aligned with left-wing ideologies, their challenges and resultant achievements were mostly focused on humanitarian principles and the ideology of humanism. Many participants expressed a need for the confidentiality of their own or their organization's identities throughout any discourse about religion.

My focus on creating secure environments for women is based on humanitarian principles, rather than religion. I've faced challenges to my religious perspective. While religion may have positive aspects, individuals can promote gender equality and women's development without it. In our cultural context, marginalized groups like women and minorities face oppression from religious institutions. Hence, there's a collective desire to support and advocate for their rights and well-being. (Respondent-10, Group-1)

I prefer not to extensively discuss religion. I'm currently dissatisfied but won't disclose specifics. I lack expertise in religious discourse. Prioritizing service to humanity over one faith is crucial. The use of religion to restrict women in Pakistan is disheartening and should be discouraged universally, as it suppresses women's inherent power. (R-3, G-1)

Disengagement from Politics and Religion

Numerous individuals identifying themselves as liberals have tended to disassociate themselves from both political and religious organizations:

I'm deeply patriotic but don't align with political or religious factions due to perceived insincerity. I advocate for gender equality, ending unethical practices, equal rights for minorities, community colleges for the disadvantaged, and better education for differently-abled students. (R-3, G-1)

We acknowledge Islamic practice of hijab but find no prohibition on women boxing. We avoid theological interpretations and political slogans. We believe in women's equal capabilities. Many men need help to match our skills. Our goal is to bring honor to our families and nation through our passion for boxing. (R-2, G-2)

The Prospect of a Better Future

I'm hopeful about the progress in religious education in Karachi, which will empower women to promote piety and disseminate religious teachings. The growth of Islamic channels and Madrassas bodes well for the security and well-being of our Muslim state and its women. (R-7, G-2)

I see great potential in Pakistan, especially among our youth. Their resilience, staying positive in adversity, strengthens our nation. To achieve an egalitarian society, we must overcome obstacles like self-doubt, lack of confidence, judgment, and prejudice. The youth

needs time. Creating an equitable, non-nationalist society, especially for women's rights, is attainable. (R-8, G-1)

Discussions

This study delves into the experiences of female Pakistani activists in Lahore, Pakistan, hailing from both liberal and conservative groups, concerning issues of gender identity, feminism, and religious nationalism. It involved twenty in-depth interviews with female participants involved in distinct activities.

The findings suggest that participants' experiences and perceptions regarding gender identity, feminism, and religious nationalism are significantly influenced by their political and religious beliefs. Women aligned with liberal groups in Pakistan actively engage in discussions on feminism, nationalism, and religious fanaticism, challenging traditional gender norms and societal expectations. Overall, the study reveals a noticeable division in how individuals perceive and approach these issues, which also intersect with nationalist sentiments in the country.

In Pakistan, notable disparities exist in the perspectives and experiences of women belonging to different groups concerning gender roles. For instance, Group 1 women generally view the concept of equality as straightforward but acknowledge the obstacles hindering its comprehension and implementation. Group 2 women believe that their religious beliefs promote equality within their personal lives, although they recognize the need for greater understanding of this concept among Pakistani and Western women. Liberal women, in particular, are committed to advocating for women's rights and challenging traditional gender roles, seeking to break free from societal limitations to fulfill their potential.

This study aligns with the work of Nagel (1998) and Ramaswamy (2001), as it shows that liberal participants actively promote gender equality and actively work against the systemic oppression women face daily. However, misogyny remains a significant issue in Pakistani society and impacts both men and women. Those who deviate from traditional norms and expectations may internalize sexism and criticize other women. This societal misogyny and conservatism restrict women to domestic roles and prevent their participation in politics.

According to Khan's (2002) research, nationalism contributes to the construction of Muslim gender identity. In this study, conservative participants uphold strict adherence to Islamic laws due to Pakistan's status as an Islamic state. They advocate for traditional gender roles, viewing women's liberation as diminishing their societal standing. They align with right-wing nationalism, emphasizing cultural elements like music and alcohol consumption and discouraging women's active political participation.

Many participants connect religion with the political sphere in Pakistan, with conservative religious views favoring Islamic orthodox nationalism and opposing feminism. Religious fundamentalism imposes strict gender roles and responsibilities, contributing to conservative ideologies. This aligns with Luxemburg's ideas in 1976.

Within Islamic nationalism in Pakistan, masculinity takes center stage, with men assuming primary leadership roles and women primarily as support. Conservative participants view women's primary duty as supporting men, refraining from political conflicts or warfare, and focusing on nurturing children. Liberal women, on the other hand, employ coping mechanisms like cultivating resilience, providing mentorship to younger women, and distancing themselves from religious affiliations to overcome challenges.

The study shows that religious conservatives often use faith to justify their attitudes and behaviors, while liberals take a more cautious approach. Liberal women prioritize a humanitarian approach but may experience guilt when deviating from norms. The study also suggests that women affiliated with grassroots organizations actively assist impoverished women, enhancing their socioeconomic status and promoting economic and social egalitarianism.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complexities surrounding gender identity, feminism, and religious nationalism in Pakistan. It emphasizes the need to challenge restrictive measures imposed on women by fundamentalist ideologies and calls for a critical examination of national identity discussions. The study also highlights the importance of women's involvement in national development and the urgent need to address women's issues in Pakistan.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the use of snowball sampling and the potential for differing perspectives among Muslim women. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by female activists in Pakistan and contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment in the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study investigates the opinions of conservative and liberal women activists regarding nationalism, feminism, gender roles, and religious norms in Pakistan. Numerous female activists and artists with liberal ideologies exhibited deviant behavior as they actively opposed religious and misogynistic nationalism within the cultural context of Pakistan. The study's findings indicated that women who actively opposed right-wing nationalism were strongly committed to advocating for women's rights and striving for gender equality, emphasizing empowering women as autonomous persons. The individuals wished to assert their rights to use and utilize public spaces without limitations, enabling them to freely pursue their chosen endeavors and identities. The findings above are significant for the ongoing discourse on gender equality in Pakistan.

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