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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of women's rights within the context of social reform movements in Pakistan, exploring the intersection of gender equality with cultural, religious, and political dynamics. From the pre-partition era to the present day, women in Pakistan have engaged in diverse activism efforts aimed at securing fundamental rights, including access to education, legal protections, and political representation. The study focuses on key movements that have shaped public discourse, such as the Women's Action Forum, and considers the role of non-governmental organizations, government policies, and social media in advocating for women's empowerment. By assessing the impact of these movements on social attitudes and institutional frameworks, the article sheds light on ongoing challenges and the way forward for gender equality in Pakistan, emphasizing the crucial role of collective action in transforming societal norms.

Keywords: Women's Rights, Social Reform, Gender Equality, Pakistan, Women's Action Forum, Activism, Empowerment

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Women's Rights and Social Reform Movements in Pakistan

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of women's rights within the context of social reform movements in Pakistan, exploring the intersection of gender equality with cultural, religious, and political dynamics. From the pre-partition era to the present day, women in Pakistan have engaged in diverse activism efforts aimed at securing fundamental rights, including access to education, legal protections, and political representation. The study focuses on key movements that have shaped public discourse, such as the Women's Action Forum, and considers the role of non-governmental organizations, government policies, and social media in advocating for women's empowerment. By assessing the impact of these movements on social attitudes and institutional frameworks, the article sheds light on ongoing challenges and the way forward for gender equality in Pakistan, emphasizing the crucial role of collective action in transforming societal norms.

Keywords:

[Women's Rights](#), [Social Reform](#), [Gender Equality](#), [Pakistan](#), [Women's Action Forum](#), [Activism](#), [Empowerment](#)

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Introduction

Feminism is a crucial factor in the development of every society, but it still remains one of the most discussed phenomena around the world. The process of advocating for gender equality is well illustrated through the world map, in whichever culture,

religion, or politics it might be found (Khan, 2021). With its complex sociopolitical history and diverse cultural figures, Pakistan makes for a highly insightful context through which the intersection between women's rights and larger movements of social change may be explored. The historical development of these rights in Pakistan up to the present has made



endeavors on gender equality challenging by cultural, religious, and political influences while at the same time providing momentum to move forward. Women's rights consist of rights to education, voting, employment, and equal protection against acts of violence based on gender. In Pakistan, these rights have been advocated by different agents, individuals at the community level, NGOs, and institutions. However, these efforts have not helped in achieving gender equality and parity especially due to the existing patriarchal culture and structures (Khushbakht, 2020). The analysis of the social reform movement especially those led by women is a good source of understanding strategies and results of activism confronting oppressive societies.

The history of women's activism in Pakistan can further be linked back to the pre-partition period, although key activists include Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and others for their work on the rights of women's education and social emancipation in South Asian countries. Even during the struggle for independence, there were demands for a new homestead and the new states' rights of women. However, the situation after independence was different, there were many factors that Pakistan could not control. Cultural and religious sentiments actually worked in a vicious cycle where on one hand it was well appreciated and used as national identity and on the other hand was being misused as a tool for gender discrimination. Finally, as for the developments in social legislation, the decades following Pakistan's independence wavered between progressive and reactionary forces. The initial years of independence under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah gave people the picture of a liberal, progressive, welfare state, however, later on, different political regimes tried to be either secular or Islamic (Awan, 2020). It means that women became an object of ideologies when their rights were put on the scales of cultural or religious savings. There has been a significant decline in women's rights especially during general Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s when restrictions were put in place under the banner of Islamization by the State.

Yet, women's rights activists and organizations became formidable actors for change in this difficult

context. WAF for instance was formed in 1981 out of the realization of discriminative laws and practices back then. The WAF and similar movements did not only protest against the oppressive policies but also introduced a new dimension to the women's liberation movement in Pakistan (Saigol, 2020). These works went beyond legal cases as they brought to question the culture's social practices and promoted a change in gender attitudes. The NGOs and the international collaboration have been helpful in voicing the women of Pakistan as they have contributed to writing this book. They have provided education, health care, and vocational training for women to be educated especially from poor backgrounds. They have also availed information dissemination channels of ignorance matters like; domestic violence, child marriage, and workplace harassment. Nevertheless, the focus on extra-comical sources and the perception of Western influence has occasionally been met with resistance revealing an important aspect of the global/local tensions inherent in the establishment of international solidarity (Ahmed, 2021).

Over the past decade, the phenomenon of social media has transformed the organization of advocacy for women's rights in Pakistan. Through Social media such as Twitter and Instagram, grassroots movements have been able to attract national and even international concern. That is why such recent and global movements as #MeToo have echoed in Pakistan too: women belonging to different layers of the population told about harassment and abuse (Rauf, 2022). It has also helped plan large marches like Aurat March where a gender equality movement becomes an annual event demanding change at the structural level (Akhtar, 2021). Nevertheless, the fight against Pakistani women continues to face significant hurdles despite the progressive changes. Current perceptions regarding the status and roles of women and men are still shaped by patriarchal culture and religion. Moreover, bureaucratic presentations including women's lack of voice in decision-making, and differential resource endowments give a poor perspective. However, advocacy for women's causes is frequently met with hostility in the form of ridicule to

threats of deadly violence, making equality a very dangerous endeavor (Tarar, 2020).

The history studying of the legal status of women combined with other forms of social change in Pakistan reveals the successes and challenges of the women's rights movements (Zaman, 2020). Appreciating the significance of the histories, functions, and approaches of those movements is highly helpful when trying to establish protective and efficient practices and policies. Thus, this study has the intention to add to this knowledge by exploring the development of women's rights under the domain of social change in Pakistan. Although there are various scholarly articles and resources available on the subject of women's rights and activism in Pakistan, there is a dearth of extensive literature that issues linked between past and present struggles as well as movements and plans (Batool, 2021). A majority of the studies look at only the cultural/religious or the legal/institutional perspectives but very few integrate them. In addition, the role of novelty forms of activism such as social activism has not been well understood especially in light of new platforms such as social media.

This paper aims to fill these gaps to give a comprehensive view of the development of women's rights in Pakistan with a historical background to today's trend. It will examine the contribution of the various players such as the NGOs, government policies, and grassroots organizations in determining the nature of gender discourses being promulgated now. The other question that the study seeks to answer is the role played by social media in raising the voices of women and whether it is capable of changing culture. Finally, the study aims to find out the way forward in dealing with the existing challenges with a view to enhancing the fight against gender equality in the Pakistani context.

Historical Context of Women's Rights Movements

The historical trajectory of women's rights movements in Pakistan is therefore deeply embedded within the broader socio-political dynamics of the region. Women in South Asia played a significant role

in advocating for education and social reforms before partition. Activists such as Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain laid the groundwork for gender equality, emphasizing education as a transformative tool for women's empowerment (Anjum, 2021). These early reform efforts intersect with anti-colonial movements that placed women not only on the receiving end but also on the forefront of the battle against colonialism (Awan, 2020).

After Pakistan's independence in 1947, women's roles became a subject of political and cultural negotiation. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision for Pakistan included progressive ideals for women's rights, as evidenced by his public endorsement of their participation in nation-building (Haq, 2020). However, post-independence leadership often failed to institutionalize these ideals, and patriarchal norms continued to dominate societal structures (Coulson, 2021). The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, of 1961 was a progressive reform under Ayub Khan which was an exception to others. This legislation dealt with issues of polygamy and inheritance but found itself facing stiff resistance from reactionary religious groups (Akhtar 2021).

The rise of General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies in the 1980s was a watershed moment in the history of women's rights. The Hudood Ordinances, for instance, institutionalized gender discrimination and further marginalized women in both public and private spheres (Khan, 2021). It was during this period that resistance movements such as the Women's Action Forum (WAF) were formed and became the central force in opposing regressive policies and advocating for gender justice (Saigol, 2020).

These historical developments reveal the political regimes, social norms, and women's activism that together shape the trajectory of gender rights in Pakistan. These legacies continue to inform contemporary struggles for equality and justice.

Impact of Socio-Political Regimes on Women's Rights

Socio-political regimes have strongly shaped the country's policies and governance structures. In the immediate post-independence period, Muhammad

Ali Jinnah envisioned an inclusive society with the participation of women in nation-building (Shehzadi, 2024). However, subsequent regimes did not have a clear-cut agenda that could make women's rights part of the equation, so the rights were largely unaddressed. Ayub Khan introduced the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 during the 1960s. This marked significant legislation on women's rights regarding marriage and inheritance. However, this ordinance was opposed violently by various sections and reflects the entrenched patriarchal culture at that time (Irshad, 2023).

The socio-political environment of the 1970s under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto witnessed growing interest in women's education and employment with political participation at the top of the agenda. The period also witnessed the establishment of reserved seats for women in parliament, which indicates a growing desire to include women in representation (Murtaza, 2024). Political instability, however, was too dominant to allow such initiatives to have long-lasting impacts.

The most reactionary period in terms of women's rights was during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), where Islamization policies institutionalized gender oppression. The Hudood Ordinances and the Qanun-e-Shahadat Order lowered the rights of women in court and made social roles more constrictive on women (Ahmed, 2023). This had been a period of unrelenting repression of freedom for women but also organized resistance from feminist organizations in the form of the WAF, which became vociferous in opposition to Zia's policies.

Successive democracies attempted to undo some of these retrograde policies by adopting pro-women legislation. The institutional framework and social attitude of the past regimes are, however, reflected in contemporary Pakistan, with the relationship between political governance and gender equality in the country being extremely complex.

Key Women's Rights Movements and Organizations

Women's rights movements in Pakistan have been

very active in voicing gender equality and countering the oppressive structure of society. However, the most prominent group is the Women's Action Forum, which started in 1981 in the wake of General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization era. This group was formed as a response to the Hudood Ordinances that legitimized gender discrimination. The organization became a strong platform for feminist activism with protests, legal interventions, and public awareness campaigns to protest regressive policies and raise women's rights issues (Akhtar, 2021). WAF's activism was not only in legal reform but also addressed deep-rooted cultural and societal norms that sustained gender inequality. The group managed to mobilize women from all walks of life, thus creating a collective resistance to patriarchy. WAF's initiatives also inspired subsequent feminist movements, making it a pioneering women's rights advocacy organization (Anjum, 2021).

Other organizations too have played a significant role in the cause of women. For example, the Aurat Foundation was established in 1986, and it has remained focused on the empowerment of women through education, building capacity, and lobbying legislation that is gender-sensitive. It has borne fruits, such as laws against domestic violence and against workplace harassment (Tarar, 2020). Similarly, the All Pakistan Women's Association, which was established in 1949 by Begum Liaquat Ali Khan, emphasized education, health, and economic empowerment of women as its founding role in the early years of women's rights movements.

These last few years have seen Aurat March-type movements come up front and center, demanding change through systemic reforms and also bringing marginalized women to voice. This shows how, in Pakistan, women's rights activism is changing – moving from traditional methods to modern strategies to address perennial issues. Together, they stand witness to how movements make all the difference in changing society to benefit equal opportunity among genders.

Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Non-governmental organizations or NGOs have

been a cornerstone in the steps towards women's rights promotion in Pakistan, bridging gaps left by governmental measures and societal systems. First, NGOs focused on critical issues within these communities, including domestic violence, lack of equal education, and economic equality. One of the leading NGOs in this area is the Aurat Foundation, which was founded in 1986 (Shah, 2020). It has been working towards women's empowerment through education, advocacy, and efforts for legal reform. This organization has been instrumental in shaping the legislation that would include the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (2013) (Dashti, 2021).

Similarly, the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) has, over the years, contributed to the development of women's education, health, and vocational training. APWA, established in 1949 by Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, was instrumental in addressing the immediate post-independence needs of women and remains a model for early women-focused NGOs (Shahzad, 2022). Other organizations, such as Shirkat Gah and Bedari, work at grassroots levels for awareness about gender rights, legal aid, and vocational training for the most vulnerable groups (Adil, 2023). Despite their great contribution, NGOs are often criticized and confronted with other challenges. The accusations sometimes made against them of the promotion of Western values and the dependence on foreign funding erode credibility in many conservative circles. Moreover, the socio-political setting often poses barriers, particularly resistance from local communities, and a lack of resources (Ghani, 2020). However, NGOs have played a major role in promoting change creating awareness, and providing avenues for women to claim rights, which complements both grassroots movements and formal political advocacy.

Impact of Social Media on Women's Rights Advocacy

Social media has revolutionized the scenario of women's rights activism in Pakistan by providing an opportunity for awareness and mobilization that has

never been seen before. Through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, women are able to amplify their voices and take grassroots movements onto the world stage. This includes the #MeToo movement that went viral all over the world and reached far and wide in Pakistan as well, where now women come out in open rebellion against harassment and abuse (Younas, 2020).

It also led to the large public rally for the Aurat March which was a yearly protest for bringing in systemic changes and seeking equal rights for women. The Aurat March slogan "Mera Jism, Meri Marzi" - that is "My Body- My Choice"- flooded social media platforms, spurring national conversations around discussions around women's freedom and rights (Naseem, 2020). In other words, aside from the sharing of such information, it has presented challenges to dominant narratives which have brought along mainstream questions on workplace harassment, home violence, and reproductive issues.

Besides, social media has empowered marginalized voices, such as rural women, to voice their experiences and issues that mainstream media fail to report. It has democratized activism because people who are not members of any formal organization can engage in activism (Ammari, 2022). However, it has its challenges. Women activists often experience online harassment in the form of threats of violence, doxxing, and defamation, which may undermine their advocacy work.

Cultural and Religious Influences on Gender Equality

This paper aims to identify both cultural and religious empowering factors encouraging women's rights in Pakistan as well as restrictive factors that hinder these rights. The culture prevalent in Pakistan is highly conservative, where women are socially and politically oppressed within their homes and society. Such beliefs are backed by religious practices especially where scriptural references are employed to perpetrate gender bias (Iqbal, 2022).

Islam and religion in general, play an important role within the Pakistani societies and have been used by those supporting and those opposing women's

rights. Modernists call attention to the utterance of the Prophet Muhammad and the Quranic legal provision concerning women's right to education, inheritance, and decision-making. However, in most cases conservative exegetical approaches are prevailing in the public sphere, limiting women's rights and strengthening male dominance (Nawaz, 2021).

Cultural and religious values were most felt during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq who officially vended substandard policies that were bound in the name of Islamization. It established laws like the Hudood Ordinances and the Qanun-e-Shahadat Order, which further eliminated women's legal entitlements while endorsing a culture that ostracized women's independence (Omer, 2021).

Nonetheless, women's rights activists have been able to negotiate through cultural and religious barriers to fight for gender parity. Engaging with religious texts and cultural values has proved activist strategies effective in resisting patriarchal readings of the Quran and spreading progressive changes (Ali, 2022). For instance, currently, there are other organizations such as the Women's Action Forum (WAF) that have highlighted that women's rights do not contravene Islamic rules and regulations, opposition being from cultural beliefs and discrimination by institutions. This view of gender quotas reflects a more nuanced understanding of the issue in a context where culture and religion play a role.

Challenges to Women's Rights Advocacy

Advocating women's rights in Pakistan is always a challenge for activists, as they face patriarchal norms, institutional resistance, and societal backlash. In such circumstances, cultural traditions or religious interpretations often become significant obstacles to gender equality, strengthening the notion that women are in subordinate positions in private and public spheres (Usman, 2021). All these norms come out in some systemic issues, such as child marriage, domestic violence, and limited access to education and healthcare, especially in rural areas.

Institutional barriers also contribute, as inequality in political and economic spheres among women has not decreased. On the legislative side, for example, there is the Act of Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (2010) that has not been effectively implemented because mechanisms for its enforcement are weak while accountability is nonexistent (Saigol, 2020). Legal structures such as the Hudood Ordinances also have a persistent impact on gender inequality among women in the justice sphere.

The backlash from society further complicates advocacy. Women's rights activism is frequently accompanied by harassment, threats, and violence, both on and offline. Movements such as the Aurat March have faced criticism and pushback from opponents who attribute the cause to the inculcation of "Western" values that are anti-traditional and against religious beliefs (Tarar, 2020). This is a reflection of the unease in societal narratives toward progressive gender-equality discourse.

Despite these challenges, activists have not discontinued innovation, using digital platforms and grassroots networks to mobilize support and raise awareness. In fact, this reflects the struggle for women's rights in Pakistan today: the need for a multiple approach that deals with these barriers at cultural, institutional, and societal levels together.

Comparative Analysis of Regional Women's Rights Movements

Examining women's rights movements across South Asia offers valuable insights into the shared struggles and unique challenges faced by women in the region. Countries like India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka share cultural and historical commonalities with Pakistan, yet their approaches to gender equality reveal distinct strategies and outcomes. In India, women's movements have historically been intertwined with broader social and political struggles, such as the anti-colonial movement and caste-based reforms. Organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) have played a crucial role in advocating for women's education, reproductive rights, and legal protections (Hussain 2021). However, challenges such

as caste-based discrimination and violence against women remain persistent issues.

Bangladesh, which shares a cultural and religious heritage with Pakistan, has seen significant progress in women's empowerment, particularly in the areas of education and economic participation. Programs like Grameen Bank's microfinance initiatives have provided rural women with opportunities for financial independence, contributing to poverty alleviation and social change (Islam, 2020). However, issues like child marriage and gender-based violence continue to hinder progress. Sri Lanka stands out in the region for its high female literacy rates and greater political representation of women. Yet, the country faces challenges related to the post-civil war context, including the marginalization of Tamil women and gender-based violence in conflict-affected areas (Bag, 2022).

Comparing these movements highlights the importance of localized strategies that address specific cultural, economic, and political contexts. For Pakistan, the successes and setbacks of neighboring countries offer lessons in balancing grassroots activism with institutional reforms and navigating the complexities of cultural and religious sensitivities.

Feminist Theory: A Framework for Understanding Women's Rights Movements

Feminist theory is a body of knowledge that helps scholars understand the nature of power relations as well as gender and resistance within patriarchal cultures and societies (Allen, 2023). Feminist theory can also be applied to Pakistan as it exposes the gender bias that is pervasive and systemic in the society at large, organizations, and society.

In its simplest form, feminist theory disputes the cultural norms that subordinate women to men. It also explores the ways in which families, communities, and institutions subjugate women and deny them voice, agency, education, and economic opportunities among others. In Pakistan, these dynamics can be seen reflected in areas such as inequality in education, employment discrimination, and high prevalence of violence against women (Humm, 2021).

One important aspect of the organizational aspect of feminist theory is the connection between oppression. To better understand how multiple systems of oppression affect women of color, Crenshaw provided the concept of intersectionality mimics how gender, class, ethnicity, and religion, intensify the burden placed on the individuals. For instance, rural women in Pakistan often experience a dual burden of oppression: endorsement of patriarchal restraints alongside economic and geographic disadvantages (Bond, 2022).

With regard to activism, the feminist theory also alludes to people's collective action against patriarchal culture. This principle is well illustrated by movements such as the women's action forum WAF which has Casey opposed laws that infringe on women's rights and sought legal redress and awareness concerning women's issues. These movements show how the concept of feminism can be implemented in real life for the revolution with practicality.

Recommendations

To advance women's rights in Pakistan, several key strategies should be prioritized:

1. Strengthen Grassroots Movements: Empower local communities through education, vocational training, and awareness programs tailored to regional needs.
2. Policy Reform and Implementation: Advocate for the strict enforcement of existing gender-sensitive laws and push for the repeal of discriminatory legislation like the Hudood Ordinances.
3. Enhance Digital Advocacy: Leverage social media platforms while addressing online harassment to foster sustainable activism.
4. Promote Regional Collaboration: Encourage knowledge-sharing and partnerships with South Asian countries to adopt successful models for gender equality.
5. Intersectional Approaches: Address overlapping oppressions by focusing on marginalized groups, including rural and minority women.

Conclusion

The history of the struggles for women's rights in Pakistan can be analyzed as a complex process influenced by historical, cultural, religious, and political factors. With the history starting from pre-partition India the women's rights movements continue to fight against the existing patriarchy. Some of the important key factors for change include lobbying by grassroots organizations, legal changes, and the introduction of social media. But serious obstacles remain, many of them embedded in social perceptions, bureaucratic processes, and core cultural biases. As social mobilizations have intensified through digital technologies activists have faced targeted and increased trolling. In this context, movements operating on the regional level reveal that it is more effective to create specific concepts regarding sociopolitical environments; furthermore,

the nature of gender-based prejudice can be explained with reference to feminism as a theory. Going forward, there is a need to strengthen community organizing, policy implementation, and advocacy to address multiple forms of oppression. Despite these issues, mainstream women's organizations' continuous activism shows that positive change is achievable, though constant struggle has to be put in to counter the emerging problems and establish a just society. The study has a few weaknesses since it uses secondary sources thereby reducing first-hand sources and lacking a comprehensive approach to exploring the sustainability of digital activism. Future researchers should look at the effects of social networking sites on systemic change and social norms and norms of Pakistan.

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