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Women in Pakistan: A Review of Socio Cultural Forces & Education

Abstract:

The broader aim of this research is to reveal the prevailing narratives and power dynamics which encase women and influence their identity construction in postcolonial Pakistan. The paper aims to theoretically analyze the condition and situation of women in contemporary Pakistani society through a post-structural feminist standpoint. Grounded in post-structural theories of gender, power, and identity the present study provides an overview of sociocultural forces which impact the life, education, and economic empowerment of women. More broadly, this analysis clarifies the basis of inequality in Pakistani society along with a variety of related notions which demarcate gender disparity in the society; such as sociocultural traditions and discriminatory laws. The assessment suggest that the identity of Pakistani women is outlined by a variety of socio-cultural mores, historical factors and religious causes. The study highlights the various impediments to gender inequality in Pakistani society, foremost among them are different kinds of subjugation and discrimination women in different positions have to encounter due to male domination and patriarchal prejudice.

Keywords: Women's status, discrimination, gender inequality, female education, socio cultural traditions.

The Ideology:

"No nation can rise to the height of glory unless their women are side by side with them…It is crime against humanity that our women are shut up with in the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live."...

"Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Father of the Nation" (cited in Bhattacharya, 2013 p.179)

Background of the Study:

In recent times industrialization, urbanization and globali-zation have hugely impacted the life of women all around the world particularly in the Muslim world where, on the one hand, women are struggling for autonomy, and on the other hand they are trying to position themselves within the market economy. As a result, postcolonial Muslim countries including Pakistan are redefining their conventional boundaries, value systems, legal structure, and economic strategy relating to the rights and position of women in society. The explanation for this is that development in information and communication technology and improvement in public transport services have united women globally. Women can now interact with one another and hold their governments to accountability.

As a postcolonial state Pakistan was created in the name of Islam which was at the ideological root of the Two-Nation Theory; therefore, the dominant rules of governance and laws of the state are drawn from Islam. Pakistani culture is powerfully under the grasp of patriarchy where women are regarded as second-rate citizens and subordinate elements of the social order. Thus, the protection of women is the responsibility of their menfolk who exercise power to control and subjugate women. This renders Pakistani women vulnerable to violence physical, as well as mental and emotional violence (Ibrahim, 2005).

To illuminate the complexities surrounding Pakistani women one has to understand that Pakistani society envisions the place of women within the house's four walls, popularly known as *chardivari.* The social space is; thus demarcated into *Undar* (inside, and *Bahar*, (outside) for women. Because of these conservative values and cultural mores women have a restricted life and are kept out of power by denying them any space in decision making (Status Report, 2016).

The Rationale of the Study:

The rationale behind this study is to theoretically analyze the constraints women face in Pakistani society due to their gender, the initiatives by the government to curb them, and the issues of implementation of these initiatives. The key objectives of

the research are as follows:

1) To categorize the social impediments to women's progress and empowerment in contemporary Pakistani society.

2) To study cultural drivers of inequality in the society which hamper the education and life chances for women.

Pakistani Women: A Diverse Group:

In Pakistan, feminists have been pressed to negotiate female identity at the crossroads of secular and Muslim feminism, both of which are at the opposite poles.

"Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the "third-world-woman" caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development" (Spivak ,1999, p.304).

Pakistani may not be considered as a homogeneous faction as their lived experience is arbitrated all the way through their agency, which itself oscillates via their participation in social and economic activities in the social order (Status Report, 2016).

Mumtaz and Shaheed have described the multiplicity of female identity (1987) as:

"Depending on her geographical location, a Pakistani woman can find herself in a tribal, urban, and rural environment. She can be a highly qualified and self-confident professional or a self-effacing peasant toiling alongside her men folk; she can lead a highly cloistered life...or she can be a central figure of authority in the limited circles of influential women. The Pakistani woman then is a myriad creature for whom a single image does not suffice. To talk of Pakistani women is, in fact, to talk of groups of women, of clusters of similarity in a disparate reality" (p.21).

Nevertheless, Singh (2005) points out that women act in accordance with parental and patriarchal powers to the extent that possible their identity and life are not threatened by them.

If they find these factors in danger then they resist these factors with total strength. Therefore, women in Pakistan affirm their agency when needed. As for gender roles, they have been persistently in fluctuation in Pakistan, demonstrating conflicting tendencies. Women, on the one hand, have been facing severe poverty, dearth of employment, violence, extremism; on the other hand, there is a rise in the number of women getting a university education. Resultantly, more have political acumen and an awareness of their rights due to feminist movements, and there is a broadening of public spheres for them (DAP, 2016). Women also have greater visibility in the entertainment industry, news agencies, and mass media and they are relatively free to choose their dress code and appearance. In short, gender politics has come to occupy the frontline in public debate. However, social control is still exercised and normalized through the cultural narratives of respectability and honor.

It is significant to keep in mind that Pakistani women's lives are acutely entrenched in a mixture of social relations which overlap and interact in myriad ways. Within these social relations women have to act in diverse roles which outline their lived experience. Some of the existing factors which influence female identity are as follows:

Gender- Role Ideology and Problems of Women's Sphere:

Gender-role ideology denotes the social roles linked with diverse gender orientations which construct particular gender identities (Bari, 2016). Gender ideology is created methodically and executed and carried on, and reinforced through formal and informal social structures such as; family, marriage, church, school, etc. Informal social institutions; such as customs and traditions are also part of this process as they are created by tribal, feudal, economic, and social organizations. The gender consciousness of communities is determined by symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) which gives men power over female bodies, mobility, and access to resources. These very social institutions establish access to resources and prospects and the circumstanc-

es essential for such access. Cultural patterns are averse to women; therefore, women cannot enjoy their officially permitted rights in Pakistani society.

The major factors which subjugate women in Pakistani society are the prominence given to women as prime caregivers and gender-based separation in the public sphere. The Islamic world exercises gender–based segregation rooted in the notion of chastity and space (Ahmed, 1992; Hassan, 2000; Tabari & Yeganeh, 1982) ; consequently, it has caused a restraint in terms of women's right to use socio-political, monetary, and academic resources. Women's participation and visibility in public life are constrained because of the traditional Islamic discourse which is founded on gender limitations as respectability dependents on how women appear in public life.

Fatima Mernissi (2003) has clarified the conception of gendered spatial boundary as follows: "Muslim sexuality is territorial: its regulatory mechanisms consist primarily in a strict allocation of space to each sex and an elaborate ritual for resolving the contradictions arising from the inevitable intersections of spaces. Apart from the ritualized trespasses of women into public spaces (which are, by definition, male spaces), there are no accepted patterns for interactions between unrelated men and women. Such interactions violate the spatial rules that are the pillars of the Muslim sexual order. Only that which is licit is formally regulated. Since the interaction of men and women is illicit, there are no rules governing it…Any transgression of the boundaries is a danger to the social order because it is an attack on the acknowledged allocation of power. The link between boundaries and power is particularly salient in a society's sexual patterns" (p.489).

The reaction of Pakistani society to sexuality and control is similar to the rest of the Islamic world, which is marked in "a socially sanctioned silence" (Riaz, 1995, p. 25). In Pakistani culture, sex and sexuality are taboo subjects. Gendered power dynamics shape women's roles in relationships such as marriage, their interactions with their partners and other women in their

lives, and even their reproductive function. Marriage continues to be the primary location for the performance of lawful sexual relations. Resultantly; virginity and fidelity are observed as the uppermost assets for women. Because the hymen is thought to be a protective barrier to sexual contact, it is the responsibility of women to safeguard their bodies by wearing a veil and controlling their sexual urges in order to protect their family's reputation. Through these normative discourses, a perfect female identity is cultivated for a Muslim woman and perfect Islamic state citizen.(Usman, 2002).

The society has created a homogeneous image of a perfect woman as an obedient wife and mother by controlling cultural and national narratives. Motherhood is regarded as the most honorable of all female roles. Through indisputable and unchanging feminine traits, the woman's social role has been significantly condensed to the family within this ideological discourse.

Acceptance of Violence :

Violence is used as a tool to maintain the hegemonic discourses related to masculinity and femininity in Pakistani society. Real violence or the danger of being subjected to violence is reality which haunts most Pakistani women (Ali, 2001). Since society is preoccupied with female honor, grants legitimacy to men to maintain this honor by controlling women's sexuality and reproductive capability by use of force. According to a report of the United Nations violence at personal and /or social level is a common experience for women in Pakistan (UN, 2011). When the patriarchal system is threatened by the practices of women, she is restrained by inflicting violence on her body in the form of beating, blazing, and even sexual exploitation and killing behind the veil of honor (Noor, 2004). Ali and Gavino (2008) have stated that around 70% to 90% of women have to undergo violence in the shape of physical, mental or emotional exploitation in Pakistan. According to reports 10,000 are estimated to be honour-killed in Pakistan annually (Status of Women, 2016). According to

Pakistan's Human Rights Commission (2008), approximately 1,019 women were murdered under the guise of honour in 2008.

One of the contributing factors to rising violence against women is the rapid radicalization of Pakistani society which is discussed below:

The Discourse of Islamization

Here it's necessary to clarify that the term Islam refers to the religion Islam as a code of life, whereas Islamization refers to the politicized and conservative understandings of Islam rooted in stern codes of personal and social life. The military regime of General Zia assumed power in 1977 which ushered in an era of rapid Islamization of the state. This marked a major turning point for women's rights and spaces both of which were significantly altered to the disadvantage of women.

"Earlier in the 1960s, the martial law of Ayub Khan defied orthodoxy to promulgate 1961 Family Laws Ordinance, drawn up by Pakistani women activists, with clauses that discouraged polygamy, regulated divorce procedures, and introduced a minimum marriageable age for women. However, the martial law of Zia-ul-Haq held these in abeyance, and in 1979 he introduced the Hudood Ordinance which does not differentiate between rape and adultery in order to Islamize society. New blasphemy laws came into being; both were used to victimize the weakest and the most vulnerable women and minorities"(Shamsie, 2005, p.13).

During General Zia-ul-Haq's reign, radical forces gained influence and state control. The state introduced harsh and prejudiced policies towards women which glorified male superiority and women's vulnerability and delivered conservative results. Laws promulgated by General Zia's regime desecrated women by putting constraints on women's sports and performing arts. Women's testimony in legal cases was also reduced to half as compared to men in keeping with Islamic Shariah. Even before making a financial contract women were supposed to provide signatures of a male witness (Haqqani, 2005).

Post -Martial law Pakistani society became Islamized society rather than an Islamic. In Shaheed's view (1991) "The selective implementation of Islam has been responsible for the entrenchment of an all-pervasive patriarchal system of inequality and subjugation" (p.140), which impinges on women negatively. Under the overwhelming pressure of conservative factions of the society the traditional roles of women as domestic service providers, mothers and daughters became the only acceptable visions of women. According to Bhattacharya (2013) Pakistani society is basically conservative profoundly dedicated to a political ideology which deprives women of their fundamental rights and liberty. Because of the dominance of Islamic ideology in General Zia's government women became the center of attention in sociopolitical discourse. Cooke (2001) states that women became "the symbolic center of their concerns and debates" (p.13).

Nevertheless, the rights of women have been prioritized in national debate . The 1970s saw the emergence of the feminist movement, which energized women all over the Muslim world. *Shirkat Gah*, *Aurat Foundation*, *The Women's Front*, and *Women's Action Forum* (WAF) were established in Pakistan. Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987) are of the opinion that whilst the feminist movement has always existed in Pakistan, they reached a climax during Zia's presidency. Even though feminist ideas of equality are not widely accepted by the general public because they are considered un Islamic, feminists in Pakistan have continued to fight for their rights, to put an end to the supremacy of men, and to manage their reproduction wellbeing.

Parallel Judicial Systems:

An interesting facet of Pakistan is the continuation of parallel judicial systems, such as tribal courts which make the situation more complicated for women (Zia, 2013). The existence of a parallel judicial system, for instance, *Jirgas* and *Panchayat* are derogatory to women's rights and freedom; moreover, these systems have been granted local political and religious safeguards in the social structure. Parallel judicial systems

like *Jirgas* legitimize the killing, rapes, and exchange of women to settle tribal disputes. Though parallel judicial systems are illegal, they operate openly under the patronage of local politicians and tribal elders, thereby creating hegemonic patriarchal norms. These *jirgas* are detrimental to the constitutional rights of the citizens and work specifically against the interests of women as their decisions are motivated by prejudice and local cultural mores (Ibrahim, 2005). These *Jirgas* are headed mostly by men; therefore, their decisions are almost always anti-women. These parallel judicial bodies inflict penalties and reprimand those who claim their rights and freedom against the approved codes of the tribal system (Bari & Khattak, 2001).

Drivers of Inequality in Female Education:

The National census 1998 describes an educated person as one who is ten years of age or over and, "can read a newspaper and write a simple letter, in any language." This has established literacy parameters in Pakistan. However, whilst this definition has located literacy to its bare minimum, a large number of people do not meet even this standard (Alif Ailaan, 2014). Statistics on enrollment numbers in Pakistan demonstrate that 15.9 million boys between the ages of 5 and 16 are admitted to school, while only 11.9 million girls are enrolled. Approximately 25.5 million kids between the ages of 5 and 16 are not attending schools, with girls accounting for half of the total (Alif Ailaan, 2014). As per the 2013-14 Status of Women Report, 60 percent of girls aged 6 to 10 were registered in primary school, while 32 percent of girls aged 11 to 13 were registered in middle school. In contrast, only 13% of girls between the ages of 14 and 15 were registered in matriculation (Status Report, 2016). This blunt variation is alarming for authorities in Pakistan. Poverty is the main factor behind the literacy rate of female registration in schools and elevated dropout ratios (Sheikh, 2009). Educational infrastructure is scarce and insufficient to cater to the needs of female students like the lack of potable water and washroom facilities in government schools. The low literacy rate of women

is mainly responsible for the persistence of inequality and the appalling state of Pakistani women. The involvement of women in the social and political spheres is hampered by a lack of education because of which they are not able to attain their goals and rights and participate in the job market (Kazmi, 2005). Furthermore, lower returns of literacy; gender-biased behaviors, and probable harassment at workplace hamper women's participation in learning and work. This has left women isolated and politically powerless in society.

Although, women's involvement in higher education has augmented in recent years, it's predominantly restricted to those with adequate access to resources. The enrollment of females in public and private universities of Sindh, is 48% at Master's and Ph.D. level, while the enrollment of male students is 52%. In 2014-15, more girls than boys were predicted to be admitted to universities (Status Report, 2016). Even though the accessibility of scholarships and positive actions by the state have continued to improve the condition, improved but other factors, such as widely held beliefs about women's social roles as homemakers, continue to limit women's admittance to learning (Status Report, 2016) Irrespective of the societal rank, women are required to perform household tasks whether they are educated or not. The condition is more demanding for educated girls because they must perform household chores following academic hours (DAP, 2016).

One of the chief hindrances in female education in Pakistan is cultural mores which prefer males over females in every sphere of life. As capital and resources are unequally dispersed in Pakistan, most parents have a preference to send their sons to schools rather than daughters. One of the reasons behind it is the anticipation that sons stay with their parents and look after them in old age. In this regard, King and Hill (1993) note that the cost of education for a son is considered as measured an investment which will guarantee a prosperous future for the family, while girls' schooling is measured as a load and expenditure which will yield no positive outcome for future. Another hin-

drance to female education in Pakistan is an over-emphasis on a girls' chastity because of which parents feel compelled to keep their daughters away from schools to ensure their safety. Some parents also prefer girl-only (single-sex) schools for their daughters, which are very few especially in remote areas.

Negative pointers for the development of women in the social field are a grave challenge for Pakistan. To maximize female involvement in the economic sector the government has developed gender-responsive strategies, established institutions; such as Ombudspersons, and promoted laws to ensure the safety and security of women, for instance, *The protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act* (2010). Although the state has prioritized the rights of women and set up gender parity as its main concern, the uptake of all these initiatives is extremely slow.

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE):

Economic empowerment and participation of women in the economy is globally recognized as an essential requirement for the growth of a nation. This need has been well documented in the principal planning document Vision 2025, issued by the Government of Pakistan. The concept of women's economic empowerment (WEE) is a complex one, rooted in the very structure of society. It is more problematized in Pakistan because of political instability, humanitarian crises, and complex emergencies which have hampered progress over the last decade and a half.

The conceptual framework of WEE links together two interrelated concepts which are essential to put the current study into perspective. One concept is economic advancement and the other is of agency (the power to make choices and decisions for one). In order to empower women, they must be equipped with proper skills and resources and have fair and equal access to the economic market. They must also have a conducive environment to exercise their agency to benefit from economic activities.

Three indicators have been set forth to judge women's empowerment

a) The first one access and process, which stand for the number of barriers and opportunities faced by women.

b) Economic advancement which stands for skills, productivity, income, work environment, etc.

c) Agency and power: this includes gender roles, autonomy, mobility, and control over the asset.

As far as Pakistan is concerned from the discussion above its apparent that it does poorly on all the indicators stated above. *The Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan* (Status Report, 2016) suggests that the agency of women may be improved by increasing their ability to influence economic decision-making and challenge discriminatory socio-cultural practices/ norms.

Measures towards the Betterment of Women in Pakistan:

Pakistan has enacted numerous laws to protect women since its independence. According to Pakistan's Constitution (1973):

a) "There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex"; 14.

b) "Steps shall be taken to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of national life"; 15.

c) "The state shall protect the marriage, the family, the mother and the child"; 16.

The 18 Amendment to the Constitution (2010) granted greater autonomy to the provinces towards the advancement of women alongside many other powers (UN, 2013). However, the implementation of these laws and policies has been a perennial problem. Some of the pro-women legislation is:

a) Protection of Women Act (2006), revised the Hudood Ordinance.

b) Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2010 (on sexual harassment).

c) Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace, 2010.

d) Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act, 2011.21

e) Criminal Law Act (Second Amendment, 2011), referred to as Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act.

f) The Women in Distress and Detention Fund (Amendment) Act, 2011

g) Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection), Act 2012.

h) National Commission on the Status of Women Act, 2012.

i) Enforcement of Women Ownership Rights Act 2012 (Bhattacharya, 2013).

Moreover, Pakistan has ratified a number of regional and international agreements which promote the freedom, rights, and security of women, for instance, *the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)*, *The Beijing Plan of Action*, and *The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW). In 1996 Pakistan acceded to CEDAW with this reservation:

j) "The accession by Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the (said Convention) is subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan."

Lack of political will and radicalization of the society are the two main hindrances towards the implementation of these policies. Thus, the majority of these laws are still limited to documentation alone, since the state has little if any enforcement apparatus for these laws and the deluge of terrorism and crime keeps the state machinery stretched. Conversely, there is a cold indifference to women's issues. Pakistani society still remains under the stronghold of a religious and political ideology which believes in excluding women from the public sphere (Bhattacharya, 2013).

Conclusion:

Education is critical to the advancement of humanity. No policy for social change can be effective without education as it aims to increase the knowledge and awareness of an individual. For women, education is crucial as it enables them to form social ties based on equality and self-respect. It also enables women to participate in the economy of the country as a skilled labor force. Women can participate in the economic growth of a country depending upon what choices of literacy they have and the freedom to choose from them. In the present, some key issues concerning female education have been highlighted followed by the challenges which women face towards the attainment of education. In Pakistan; although, empowerment is recognized as a key for determining the place of women in the social order, women suffer from various vulnerabilities in the socio-political sphere. The social, as well as economic standing of Pakistani women has massive disparity and heterogeneity which may be attributed to a lack of education and justice, discriminatory laws, religious extremism, and lack of implementation of pro-women legislation. Women's predicament might differ across diverse divisions or backgrounds; however, this is the general backdrop in which Pakistani women's dilemma might be examined. Since societal transformations such as those stated above are useful only for those who are positioned lower on the power configuration in society, brining about such alterations is extremely complicated .Such condition necessitates meaningful affirmative reforms to promote women's wellbeing and close the gender gap in various domains of the social order.

"Thus, the trajectory to gender equality is through the development of a collective feminist consciousness that should drive organized social movements to transform existing oppressive and exploitative sociocultural political and economic struc-

tures of the society, that will liberate not only women but the entire humanity"(Bari, 2016, p.41 .

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