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ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONTEMPORARY SITUATION OF PAKISTANI WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical development and contemporary situation of women's rights movements in Pakistan. It explores the evolution of these movements from the pre-independence era to the present day, highlighting the key figures, organizations, and milestones that have shaped the struggle for gender equality in the country. The study examines the political, social, and cultural factors that have influenced the trajectory of women's rights activism, as well as the challenges and obstacles faced by these movements in a deeply patriarchal society. Despite significant progress in areas such as legal reforms, political representation, and education, Pakistani women continue to confront systemic discrimination, economic marginalization, and cultural barriers that hinder their full participation in public and private life. The paper also discusses the role of intersectionality in contemporary feminist discourse, emphasizing the need for inclusive approaches that address the diverse experiences of women across different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, the study highlights the transformative impact of digital activism and social media in amplifying women's voices and fostering a more engaged civil society. By bridging historical and contemporary perspectives, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggles and achievements of Pakistani women's rights movements, offering insights into the future prospects for gender equality in the country.

Keywords: Women's Rights Movements, Pakistan, Gender Equality, Intersectionality, Patriarchy, Digital Activism, Legal Reforms, Political Representation, Social Barriers, Feminist Discourse

Introduction

Women and their rights represent a crucial and significant area of academic study and social concern. Across the spectrum from the international landscape to domestic political contexts there has been a notable shift that has led to an increased focus on various issues surrounding women's rights (Khan, 2023). As a result of this change, these important issues are discussed in two distinct but interconnected ways: historically and contemporarily. In our exploration, we delve into the rich development of the women's movement throughout history while also examining the current state of contemporary women's movements as they exist and operate in today's world.

In our analysis, we investigate the various conditions and factors that precipitated the coming together of women to form social and political groups and organizations dedicated to advocating for their rights. Furthermore, we also consider the challenges and difficulties they face in this collective process in the present day (Yin & Sun, 2021). One can discern a myriad of political, social, and cultural issues that emerge from our account of the significant historical involvement of key figures in the women's movement.

This includes an emphasis on the participation and contributions of Muslim women within the greater context of the movement. Beyond this, it is vital to acknowledge that the changes in the political landscape since the year 1947 serve as a critical point of reference when attempting to understand the relationship between the historical movements of the past and those that are active today. A comprehensive understanding of the current socioeconomic, political, and cultural debates, discussions, and myriad issues that hinder women's ability to unite and advocate for their rights can only be fully grasped when one considers the historical background and context from which these movements emerged. Therefore, our objective in this examination is to present a balanced and thorough analysis of the women's movement, both from a historical perspective and in terms of its contemporary manifestations.

The name of Pakistan serves as a powerful and evocative testament, emphasizing the vast and undeniable importance of women within the ongoing debates and discussions that surround gender roles (Shakir, 2022) (Sultan2024). This is particularly relevant given the vibrant and rich literature that has been meticulously cultivated around this nation throughout its extensive and multifaceted history, which has often included the voices and experiences of Pakistani women. In the pages that follow, we will undertake a thorough and comprehensive exploration, diving deeply into the contentious assertion that women have occupied not merely a marginal role in the backdrops of history, but rather a concerted and crucial part in both the movement that ultimately led to the hard-earned independence of this uniquely resilient country

and in the national leadership that has subsequently emerged, evolved, and contributed to the ongoing development of society alongside men over the years.

We firmly assert that this independent state co-opted early representations of unity and collective identity among its diverse citizens, only to later marginalize Pakistani women through a relentless and vigilant emphasis on masculinity, along with the prevailing and deeply rooted concept of honor that persists within society and dictates the intricate and complex norms and expectations surrounding gender roles (Qasim et al., 2024). The evolution and progress of the modern women's movement have proven to be absolutely instrumental in enhancing representations of women across a multitude of societal sectors, such as politics, education, and community engagement. Moreover, it steadfastly challenges the longstanding and deeply entrenched norms of patriarchy that have routinely muted the voices advocating for essential gender equity and the rights of women, frequently leaving their vital stories untold and tragically forgotten in the annals of history (Muhammad et al., 2024).

Our argument meticulously addresses the ongoing and often heated dispute surrounding these pivotal issues, underlining the notion that the very term "Pakistani women" itself embodies an inherent and problematic co-option, reflecting the broader social and cultural dynamics at play, which all too often sideline or misinterpret the nuanced and multifaceted realities faced by women in the country (Mughal, 2022). This co-option introduces a notably complex and multifaceted dimension to the concept of the East/West binary, a framework that scholars, thinkers, and activists have engaged with for a substantial period of time now, often revealing the nuanced and intricate relationships between gender, identity, and power that significantly influence societal perceptions, structural inequalities, and political dynamics across various contexts.

The suggestion of usable anesthetics for the work of social movements, along with feminist interpretations that unflinchingly push against the grain of prevailing historical narratives, teamed with the growing body of literature that reveals the often overlooked subaltern historical record, only serves to underscore the overarching narrative of today's continuing struggles and challenges for justice and equity (Smith, 2022). This emphasizes the absolute necessity of intersectional approaches in advocating for women's rights and status within the broader societal frameworks. The motto regarding women's agency and their active political participation resonates now more than ever in this interconnected realm of women's politics, and the dynamic social movements that arise within this context contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse and dialogue about rights, representation, and empowerment of women in various sectors of society.

We will commence our comprehensive defense of this critical objective by providing a concise yet thorough overview of chapter two, which serves as a pivotal point in our expansive discussion. In this consequential chapter, we meticulously present the antics and contributions of the two founding fathers, who are often described as fetishized myths representing women's essential role in the broader movement (Azhar et al., 2021). This stands in stark contrast to an Earth Mother tradition they invoked in their numerous speeches. This revelation sheds considerable light on the complexities and contradictions of their narratives, as well as the broader implications of their political agendas.

This engagement distinctly highlights how these leaders campaigned for election within the early political landscape, promoting their assorted and often conflicting agendas while simultaneously weaving the narratives and contributions of women into the intricate fabric of their broader political discourse (Grusell & Nord, 2023). All too often, this leads to a selective acknowledgment of women's contributions that ultimately fails to capture the full extent, depth, and richness of their involvement throughout history and within various movements for progress. Through this detailed exploration, we aim to illuminate the compelling interplay of historical narratives and their profound implications for contemporary understandings of women's roles within society and the political arena at large.

This makes clear that these discussions are not only about revisiting the past but are also critically about shaping a more equitable future of gender equity for all citizens. As we probe deeper into these multifaceted and significant issues, it becomes increasingly evident that the conversations about women's representation and agency in Pakistan are not merely academic exercises, but are rather central to reshaping societal structures and expectations that have long dictated the space women occupy in both public and private realms alike. These rigid structures heavily affect women's ability to actively influence decisions that materially impact their lives, futures, and overall societal conditions.

The legacies of these discourses, embedded in the very fabric of societal norms and values, call for a vigilant reevaluation of the definitions of agency. This occurs in a context where women's voices can, and must, be heard and recognized. Such acknowledgment is vital for challenging the constraints that have historically kept them confined to the margins of political and social life (Bhatt et al.2024). Advocating for inclusive narratives that genuinely celebrate women's contributions, resilience, and profound strength is essential in fostering a more just and equitable society for everyone.

Historical Development of Women's Rights Movements in Pakistan

From the inception of Pakistan to date, the country's women's movements have a captivating story of struggle, beginning after the emergence of Pakistan. The term "women's rights movements" involves political and social movements; the political movements focus on getting women a part in formal politics, specifically in legislation, while the social movements work towards getting women public recognition or demanding certain rights or liberation (Abebaw Ejigu, 2024). It is an irony that in a country where women make up more than fifty percent of the population, their representation in the main political forums is too low. Within the broad theme of women's political and social emancipation, there lie several other hidden themes ranging from economic rights, female mobility, and education to health. Broadly speaking, however, all these movements can be classified into two groups. The first period of the women's movement in Pakistan covers the time from independence until the birth of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1967, while the time post-1967 is taken as the second phase of women's movements.

Although women before independence participated in political and social activities with a view to attaining a better status and fair treatment, they were not able to form themselves into a united group like women in some other countries at that time (Schildkrout, 2023). They did not work in an organized form. The kin groups, childcare centers, and sewing clubs are some of the units with which the pre-independence women's organizations worked. The first phase of struggle, therefore, does not cover the period of independence but the period before its birth. Discussing this first period of time is, in fact, discussing the activities in the pre-partition subcontinent. In present-day Pakistan, one finds that federal, provincial, and local level politics are male-dominated. The attempt of the women's political group was to secure suffrage or the right to vote for women (Mufti & Jalalzai). Even before they demanded the right to vote for women, some members of this group attempted to register themselves on the voters' lists of the urban municipalities and provincial legislative assemblies but failed. Political activity during the pre-independence period was confined to the education of women on politics. Muslim women's organizations did not aim at taking women to local government or any other male seat. In other words, there was no movement in the pre-partition period to fight for women member seats in any legislature that were extended to women.

Key Figures and Movements

Perhaps the forerunner of contemporary Pakistani women's activism can be identified as the Lady Health Workers' Association, which was founded by a group of largely urban-based women health workers in the year 1992. Their primary aim was to resist the Islamization project and combat its adverse effects on their professional roles and bodily integrity. However, my detailed analysis actually rests on a later and more

inclusive movement that emerged five years afterward, which is the All Pakistan Women's Association (Alam et al.2025). Launched in 1997, this dynamic movement involved a diverse range of women's groups, encompassing professional, academic, women's wings of political and religious parties, as well as non-political, student, and non-governmental organizations. Among its key figures, I refer to a select group as 'activist scholars'; these individuals are well-known contemporary Pakistani feminists who have primarily forged their activism through dedicated efforts. Additionally, they have also either produced or applied thoughtful intellectual representations of themselves as scholars who are deeply devoted to promoting the 'gender cause'.

While primarily an education and consciousness-raising network, APWA also publicly congregated in anti-dictatorship and anti-imperialist protests, and through intensive lobbying yielded significant change in education and sexual harassment policy. A third significant leader is the head of the emergent independent political party, the Women's National Round Table (Shaheen). The APWA's generation of activism succeeded in bringing the diverse feminist voices of the movement to public attention, creating unprecedented levels of press coverage – and public debate – on women's issues. By discussing successful lobbies and promising discussions, it illustrates the variety of the APWA's targets and meandering through processes of governance and allegiance, and underscores the movement's sharing of a deep social conscience that is rooted in and responsive to extended and diverse communities of activism. Just as importantly, the 100 percent volunteer format was nurturing of, and fed by, decades of experience in voluntary and social ethics.

Challenges and Obstacles Faced by Pakistani Women's Rights Movements

Pakistani women's rights movements face a host of formidable challenges. Pakistan has a very strong Islamic legitimacy, and there are systemic and legal obstacles in the path of women's rights. Besides legal stipulations, Pakistani society is dominated by cultural norms and instrumental reasons (Iqbal and Asim2024). The country was ranked 151 out of 153 in the Women, Peace and Security Index, and 133 out of 156 in the Gender Inequality Index due to low female economic participation, earning inequalities, and indices of the situation of girls and women in health, empowerment, and political representation. Further, many observers have defined Pakistani society as a "deeply patriarchal society." This systemic discrimination against women takes different forms but is generally identified as entrenched institutional bias against women situated in customary and religious narratives.

It is no surprise that this systemic infrastructure is supported by very conservative boards with wide de facto powers, which tend to follow the laws of the land. A Pakistani gender expert and activist identifies systemic state and social challenges and competing interests in the women's rights movements as the greatest challenges to

activism (Ismail et al., 2021). He notes that in many regions, it took women's movements 100 years or more to achieve major wins such as universal suffrage, reproductive rights, and equal pay for work of equal value. In light of this understanding, attention can now turn to the various challenges Pakistani women's rights movements face today. The struggle for women's rights is ideologically contested. Furthermore, there are many other significant economic factors at play that impinge on women's struggles for empowerment in Pakistan. Despite constituting 49.51 percent of the total population and 13 percent of the Parliamentarians, editorials, annuals, and other media point to politics, economies, and culture dominated by male actors. Dominant institutions note a direct link between greater women's participation in domestic, local, national, and international economies and poverty elimination. However, statistics on income and education are usually recorded only for familial heads, who are generally men (Wong, 2024). The lower incomes of female workers confirm the economic marginalization of women and girls. Domestically, the sparse empirical assessments of female work show that these workers work longer hours per day than males and that average female incomes are substantially less than those of male colleagues and relatives. Influenced by cultural norms, media censorship, NGO ideology, and state policies, the poor economic status of women and girls is very rarely questioned. The matter is not simply that highly cultural philosophical debates have displayed rather fatalistic discussions, but that these debates are also devoid of links to local actors and local realities. Every economic or gender discussion must be deeply historical and must also note how women attain just incomes on a daily basis as the column examines below.

Achievements and Progress Made

Pakistan has experienced a number of legal and administrative interventions since its creation to advance women's rights. Certainly, the women's rights movement has been successful completely or partially in some segments (Usman et al.2021). For example, significant legal reforms have taken place over the years, with laws against violence against women. Although women's political participation in Pakistan has a long history of women holding powerful ministerial and governing office, a woman serves as a Prime Minister at present. At present, women occupy key gubernatorial positions throughout Pakistan. A human rights lawyer served as the first and only female President of the Supreme Court.

Furthermore, the movements have witnessed a number of noteworthy success stories in various sectors, where women's education, health, and employment have been touched by the motivated struggle of the activists (Ebirim et al.2024). Funds have also been created to address women's problems in a large number of projects. Human rights and women's issues have been, and continue to be, reported in the media, which

serves as a positive way to deal with these issues. A growing awareness and a part of development that is highly valued recognizes men and women alike as problem-solving partners in development. The participation of women in activities that are of concern to them is manifested in the numerous activities of local and international non-governmental organizations that work in partnership with the government to advance gender-related issues in their respective areas. In most cases, special activities have been directed at building the capacity of women's rights and human rights activists and educating women, men, girls, and boys about their basic rights, including reproductive health rights. By working in partnerships, most of these initiatives have started showing positive changes in women, especially women's enthusiasm and their desire to change themselves. Women have become more eager and more vocal about problems that they feel they can address more openly and effectively, having acquired the confidence to approach and call upon duty bearers to deliver justice and good governance (Ali, 2024).

Contemporary Situation and Future Prospects

A comprehensive survey conducted in the year 2017 provided a stark rating for Pakistan, placing it as the second worst country in the entire world regarding the security and rights afforded to women (Arshad). This troubling designation serves to highlight a multifaceted reality, as countless women in Pakistan confront an unsettling combination of dire economic challenges and formidable social barriers that inhibit their progress. Despite the legal protections that the Constitution of Pakistan ostensibly affords to various marginalized and vulnerable groups, including the economically disadvantaged, scheduled castes, women, and various minority groups, the actual lived experience of many women in the country paints a dishearteningly different picture. These legal protections often exist merely on paper, remaining nominal in nature and largely failing to penetrate the harsh realities of daily life faced by many, which are significantly shaped by widespread illiteracy, stark urban and rural disparities, as well as a considerable divergence between the existing legal codes and the deeply entrenched traditional societal norms that continue to dominate social interactions.

At the same time, in a remarkable and noteworthy contrast, the advent and proliferation of social media and digital activism in Pakistan have taken on profoundly transformative roles, breaking new ground in the dissemination of activist concerns across the nation and fostering a more engaged civil society (Osman & Rafique, 2023). These digital platforms not only facilitate the airing of grievances but also shine a spotlight on the immediacy of social injustices, particularly those relating to gender-based violence. They provide a viral, mass forum where individuals can share their compelling testimonials and personal experiences with a much wider audience,

creating a sense of solidarity and shared purpose among those advocating for change. The virtual spaces that have been created by digital activism have amassed enormous followings, where prominent feminist opinion leaders continuously offer insightful contributions to feminist journalism and advocacy efforts, challenging the status quo, raising awareness, and calling for substantive change across various facets of society.

Although a small subsection of existing Pakistani law has indeed succeeded in fully empowering a select group of women, it is essential that these laws serve as a robust backbone for the contemporary feminist endeavors and movements that seek to advance women's rights further. The political landscape within the country has also witnessed notable changes that directly affect advocacy for women's rights and related issues; the current government, for its part, appears to be at least superficially committed to addressing crucial concerns, such as domestic violence, the education of girls, women's economic empowerment, and the promotion of equal opportunity across both legal and economic domains. However, in the midst of this evolving landscape, the significant role once played by older feminist organizations in influencing women's rights has diminished substantially for a myriad of reasons, including the unfortunate absence of coherent intergenerational dialogue. As a result, alternative strategies developed and employed by new organizations remain largely unnoticed and underexplored, despite their potential effectiveness.

The broader movement advocating for women's rights continues to confront sustained frustration due to two deeply interconnected issues that feminists have long sought to unravel and address comprehensively (Mackenzie, 2022). Firstly, there is the pressing matter of how women's basic roles within the family structure significantly influence their occupational identity, consequently impacting their overall economic empowerment and social standing within the community. A robust and effective feminist response must transcend the confines of any singular rule of law, specific local customs, or prescriptive notions based on religious beliefs; rather, it must embrace a multifaceted and inclusive approach that acknowledges the diverse and complex realities faced by women across various contexts.

The second critical issue centers on the important question of fostering genuine partnerships among women of varying classes and ethnicities, which has become increasingly vital in contemporary movements. Today, these thought-provoking movements no longer limit themselves to traditional welfare activities; they actively work to enhance political capacity, foster civic engagement, and amplify the voices of women from all walks of life and backgrounds. These evolving dynamics serve to illustrate the complexity and immense potential of the women's rights movement in Pakistan as it seeks not only to navigate but also to transcend the myriad of barriers it faces in its tireless pursuit of equality and justice for women throughout the nation.

Intersectionality in Pakistani Women's Rights Movements

Intersectionality has emerged as a crucial and defining concept in contemporary feminist thought and discourse. This multifaceted idea suggests that the pursuit of social justice is not only interdependent but also deeply interconnected, intertwining in ways that create intricate complexities for a woman's experience when navigating her multiple identities and diverse backgrounds (Esposito, 2024). Different social and cultural contexts lead to distinctive struggles and challenges for women who belong to various backgrounds, such as differing ethnicities, religions, and social classes. These diverse experiences reflect the nuanced layers of class power, which significantly influences the broader feminist movement and its direction. Therefore, intersectional frameworks serve as valuable tools that allow individuals to consider and analyze the different social groups and dynamics that overlap with the traditional binary division of men and women, fostering a more inclusive understanding of gender and identity. Intersectionality strongly emphasizes the understanding that various struggles are reflective of distinct agencies, which unfortunately often come with limited scopes of inclusivity. Social exclusion, extreme poverty, and widespread deprivation are not just abstract concepts but are lived realities for Dalit women who face these challenges on a daily basis (Qureshi et al., 2023). This is in stark contrast to the experiences of upper-caste women, who generally have greater access to various resources and opportunities. In the context of women's rights movements in Pakistan, many collective actions have been documented, particularly those highlighting the movement's focus on women who belong to privileged groups or those who hold a certain degree of privilege even within marginalized groups. This focus inadvertently results in the exclusion of other women, thereby perpetuating inequalities within the broader struggle for women's rights and well-being.

Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must come to terms with the fact that feminism, or the fight for women's rights in Pakistan and in any other country, is not a straightforward or uncomplicated endeavor. It is not accompanied by a homogeneous agency, especially when considering the intricate and multifaceted contexts shaped by global economics and local realities. Women's rights movements are often confronted with methodological challenges surrounding multi-positionality at macro, mezzo, and micro levels. These challenges are compounded by the intersection of local-global politics and various research approaches that tend to be normative at multiple levels, thus complicating the analysis of women's rights advancements.

The nature of personal and political resistance in this landscape demands a strategy of advocacy and action that must be compatible with an array of multiple roles. These roles are those of individuals who possess intersecting identities, which may require them to contest various biases arising from race, religion, culture, caste, class, gender,

and sexuality (Beer et al., 2021). The intersections of these identities create a complex web of experiences that necessitate a nuanced approach. Furthermore, Islamic feminism and the discourse surrounding intersectionality contribute to complicating women's resistance by challenging essentialism. They actively resist reductive local practices of rights and justice, particularly when it comes to deeply ingrained societal issues such as Karo-Kari killings and the cultural norms prevalent in rural KPK. This extensive array of challenges highlights the need for an inclusive and multifaceted approach to advocating for women's rights that acknowledge and address the diverse experiences of all women.

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