

## Feminist Movements Leading towards Emancipation or Alienation: Case Study of Pakistan

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The present study explores how people in Pakistan perceive the role played by feminists in Pakistani society, and understand the implications of feminist movements. The data were collected using an interview protocol. The sample consisted of 40 university professors and lecturers, with an equal proportion of men and women. They were recruited from various departments of public and private sector universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad using purposive and convenience sampling. An idiographic approach was used to analyze the data. The findings of the study suggest that despite numerous advantages attained from feminist movements – in the form of greater awareness of important issues and the availability of a platform to address them – in that particular culture, most of the respondents believe that feminists are alienating women rather than empowering women. It is maintained that unless gender issues are examined under the lenses colored by one's own traditions and specific values, the benefits sought by the advocates and followers of these movements would be very limited. Class, customs and religion are all an essential part of the criteria used in understanding the status, role and struggles of women in a particular society. Thus, the goals and strategies of mainstream feminism should be adapted according to indigenous needs. By acknowledging the difference of class, culture and religion, feminists can avoid marginalizing and alienating women from the social order they are a part of.

*Keywords:* Feminism, feminist movements, emancipation, alienation, Pakistan

Despite different strands of feminism, all feminists strive to change social, economic, political and cultural order to reduce discrimination against women and improve their inferior position in the society (Freedman, 2001). Throughout the history of the world, women have been oppressed, objectified, exploited and faced discrimination in all spheres of life (Jóhannsdóttir, 2009).

In historical times, matriarchal societies coexisted with patriarchal societies. However, patriarchal societies survived because as societies evolved the ones with the most "survival" advantage flourished. Marx (1869) asserted, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered from the past" (Marx, 1869, p. 277).

Parsons (1961) in his theory of structural functionalism emphasized that structures within a society are maintained because they adequately fulfill all four imperative functions: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. On the contrary, Merton (1957) opposed some of the basic postulates of functional analysis. He did not agree with the universal functionalism assumption that all standardized social and cultural forms and structures have positive functions. Patriarchal structure of society posed certain constraints and hindered women's participation in social, political and economical aspects of life; therefore, for women such a structure is considered dysfunctional (Nelson, 2004).

Consequently, shared experiences and a collective conscious of discrimination, injustices and violation of fundamental human rights of women led to the emergence of a civil society that promoted the

was led by middle class white women. Overarching frameworks are developed under the influence of subsequent versions of Western feminist theory, exporting its vision and strategies that were context specific to rest of the world. In third world countries, however, the framework of Western feminism is criticized due to its tendency to downplay class, cultural and religious differences. Its ethnocentric gaze depicted women from the developing world as victims of male control, ignorance and restrictive culture and religion (Weedon, 2002).

Tejero (2013) maintained that the role and status of women vary depending upon social and cultural factors of the society they are a part of. Socio-cultural conditions yield different problems and responses, even in relation to the same broad issues. The author points out that feminist approaches, which assume shared common identity of women based on shared experience of oppression, do not take into account plural subjectivities. Resultantly, they alienated and marginalize women by objectifying or speaking for them. Alienation involves disengagement of an individual from societal values and isolation from the community (Ankony, 1999).

Mainstream feminists uphold Western ideas of liberation and progress. They seek to achieve equality between the sexes while, their counterparts in third world countries are more concerned with the satisfaction of basic needs (Saunders, 2002). Drawing upon feminist historiography, Molyneux (2000) observed that women activists in Latin America, due to their strong identification with family responsibilities and motherhood, never embraced the concept  
27 AIN  
feminist ideology. Hence, to understand gender issues feminist movements need to bring in an actor-oriented perspective or they risk alienating the very women they fight for (Long, 2001).

The first section of the paper outlines the status of women in Islam from a social, economic and political standpoint. Further, it sheds light on the position of women in present day Pakistani society.

*Status of Women as Enshrined in Islam*

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rights of women and aimed to empower them (Freedman, 2001). The feminist movement, which has its roots in 18th century France,

The status of women in Islam is misconstrued due to the lack of a true understanding and the misbehavior of some Muslims, which has been taken to represent the teachings of Islam (Badawi, 2008). In anarchical times, in the barren desert of Arabia, Islam introduced the idea of equal status of women and provided them opportunities to establish themselves as an important part of the society (Bhattacharya, 2014). The Quran addressed men and women in the uniform manner (Khan, 2004). Superiority in Islam is only based on piety and not gender (Adeel, 2010).

#### *Social Aspect*

Islam does not subjugate the position of women. In the sight of God, women are equated with men in terms of their rights and responsibilities (Badawi, 2008). According to Islamic law, women cannot be forced to marry against their will; their right to decide and end an unsuccessful marriage is recognized. In a marriage both men and women have equal rights and claims on one another except for the responsibility of leadership, which is consistent with the nature of man (Engineer, 2008). The differences do not imply that a man has superiority or dictatorship over his wife. However, one exception in the higher status of the husband is given considering the responsibility bestowed upon men to protect, provide and look after the affairs of his family (Sulaimani, 1986). But in family decisions, Islam stresses mutual consent and counsel (Badawi, 2008).

Furthermore, Islam does not forbid women from attaining education or working outside their home (Hakim & Aziz, 1998). There is no restriction on women in terms of having a profession. In reality, a true Islamic society must have women physicians, nurses, teachers – as it is preferable to have separate gender schools for teenagers (Bhattacharya, 2014). Nonetheless, in Islam, the esteemed role of woman is that of a mother and child rearer (Badawi, 2008).

#### *Economic Aspect*

In addition to giving basic equality to women, Islam ensured legal and economic rights of women. She has the right to inheritance, and to own and sell property. She is free to earn her living and manage her money independent from her father, husband or brother (Adeel, 2010; Mushtaq, Abbasi, Nazir, & Omar, 2014). Women, in contrast to men, are less burdened with claims on their possessions. They have no obligation to spend their income or property on their family making them financially more secure (Badawi, 2008).

#### *Political Aspect*

In the Quran and Islamic history, there are instances showing involvement of women in serious discussions and arguments with the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) (Quran 58:14 & 60:10-12). However, women are ineligible for the position of head of state. This limitation has to do with differences in biological and psychological makeup of men and women (Davidson, 2013). Even today, in most developed countries, it is rare to find women in position of head of state or as commander of the armed services. This can be explained in terms of natural indisputable differences between men and women (Badawi, 2008).

#### *Status of Women in Pakistan*

In Pakistan, a huge gap exists between the teachings of Islam and the way Muslims behave in disregard to the preaching (Bhattacharya, 2014). Quranic injunctions with reference to the status of women challenge the authority of men and make women equal, which run counter to the interests of patriarchal culture (Engineer, 2011). Islam as a religion provided ample status and equal rights to women but in Pakistan people have deviated from Islamic teachings; aspects of equality have been replaced with

gender discrimination. A close examination of present day Pakistani society suggests gross violation of women rights (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Cultural patterns in Pakistan prevent women from enjoying the rights provided by Islam (Ibrahim, 2005). In many communities and tribes of Pakistan, women have been circumscribed in bounds of cultural stereotypes; they are considered inferior to men and their work in domestic sphere is undervalued. Additionally, discriminatory customs and practices prevent women from exercising their right to get education, and choosing their spouse, etc. They are subjected to violence and abuse. They are not permitted to go out for work and are confined within the four walls of the house (Jabeen & Jabeen, 2013).

Furthermore, the existence of parallel justice systems such as jirga and panchayat work against the interests of women. The decisions of jirga and panchayat are based on traditional and religious stereotypes of women's status. They unlawfully impose punishments on individuals who go against prescribed norms of the tribe (Bari & Khattak, 2001).

Nonetheless, women in Pakistan like their counterparts elsewhere in the world have had to struggle to win concessions from society. Since the inception of Pakistan, women activist pursuits have aimed at empowering women and urged them to stand up for their rights (Ali & Gavino, 2008). The struggle to liberate women and increase their presence in society has been around since the days of Fatima Jinnah, one of the leading founders of Pakistan and a prime example of a feminist. She fiercely fought for women's rights even before Pakistan was created. Soon after, Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, another pioneering in activism, founded All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) to enhance social and economic standing of women across the country. During the regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the fundamental rights of women were ensured in the Constitution adopted in 1973 (Bikhari & Ramzan, 2013).

However, in Zia-ul-Haq's era, the real wave of the feminist struggle arose as a reaction against introduction of discriminatory laws in the form of the "Hudood Ordinance". The laws were not based on Islam but biased cultural practices specific to the sub-continent, designed to gain support from orthodox religious parties. Subsequently, the Women's Action Forum (WMA), the front of many women's organization, was established in 1981 to protest against patriarchal version of religion and morality. This period saw blossoming of intellectual thought and political organizations. Large numbers of women joined professions and made significant progress (Bikhari & Ramzan, 2013).

Later, during the period of Benazir Bhutto, the first woman executive head of an Islamic country, feminism gained the most traction. Many reforms for women took place and the Convention

#### FEMINIST MOVEMENTS LEADING TOWARDS EM.

Musharaf came to power, he strengthened women's positions and encouraged their participation in socio-political activities (Bikhari & Ramzan, 2013).

Reflecting on Pakistan's history, it is clear that the phenomenon of feminism is not novel; it has been around since its creation. Yet feminists often seem to encounter resistance, not just from the orthodox segments of society but also by the intelligentsia – who have always been supportive and appreciative of the women's action movements. In Pakistan studies exploring the role of feminists in society are non-existent. Thus, to understand the criticism of feminist theory from Pakistani perspective, the paper

examines how literati perceive the role played by feminists in Pakistan, and understand the implications of feminist movements.

### Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To understand how intelligentsia perceive the role of feminists in Pakistan
2. To examine the implications of feminist movements in Pakistan

### Research Question

How do people in Pakistan perceive the role played by feminists in Pakistani society, and understand the implications of feminist movements?

### Method

#### Sample

Forty university professors and lecturers from various departments – namely, Gender studies, Software Engineering, Communication Sciences, Behavioral Sciences, Anthropology, English Literature, Psychology and Business Administration – of public and private universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, were recruited. They were selected through purposive and convenience sampling; with an equal proportion of males and females. Demographic variables taken into account: age, gender and designation. The age of the respondents ranged from 26 -56 years (*Mage* = 36.07, *SD* = 9.04 ) age range = 26–56 years). Twenty five out of the 40 participants were lecturers, six were assistant professors, eight of them were

senior associate professors, and one interview was taken from the director of one of the leading educational institutes.

### Procedure

An interview guide was prepared to collect data. The interview protocol included questions regarding the status, role, and position of women in Pakistan’s society, their perception about the role played by feminists, and implications of activist movements in society. Interviews were conducted at the respondents’ respective universities. Appointments were taken prior the interview. The nature and objectives of the research were explained, and confidentiality was ensured.

### Data Analysis

The research was qualitative in nature. All interviews were transcribed, and interviews lasted for approximately 35 minutes to 40 minutes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. It was the most suitable analysis, as it provided insight into the perspective of intellectuals coming from diverse backgrounds.

### Results

On the basis of the 40 interviews, eight major themes and several sub-themes were extracted from the respondents’ verbatim using thematic analysis. Major themes identified were: (i) successful woman; (ii) liberty; (iii) barriers to women’s empowerment; (iv) traditional roles vs. modern roles; (v) gender equality vs. equity; (vi) role of feminists; (vii) implications of feminist movements; and (viii) ignorance vs. enlightenment.

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the ideal

Table 1

*Thematic Analysis of Responses given by University Faculty (N=40)*

Theme	Subthemes	Verbatim
Successful woman	Satisfied with herself	‘A successful woman is the one who is satisfied with what she believes in and devotes her life and time to fulfill those beliefs. That belief can be success in being a good mother, career woman or a wife’ (R1)
	Stands up for herself	‘Who stands up for her rights and resists the predominantly misogynistic socio-economic culture present in most of nation states’ (R3)
	Independent and productive	‘She doesn’t necessarily have to be working in order to be successful but she should be self-aware, independent, and contribute to society in the form of good upcoming generation’ (R19)
	Fulfills all her roles and responsibilities	‘A successful woman is one who is able to fulfill all her responsibilities, and maintains a balance between her family, professional and social life’ (R13)
Liberty	Freedom of expression	‘Liberty, in essence, is the freedom to express oneself freely, to live one’s life as one pleases and to be able to voice opinions against matters that one opposes without the threat of any backlash’ (R3)
	Freedom to exercise own will but within set limits	‘It is freedom of thought and action within the parameters of norms and boundaries... Liberty comes with responsibility. It is working within limits’ (R17)
Barriers to women’s empowerment	Patriarchal structure of society	‘Female illiteracy is substantially higher than male illiteracy, especially in rural areas. Corporate

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		opportunities and job security are minimal if one's a woman, especially during middle age when socio-economic vulnerability is at its peak. Furthermore, the income gap between the two genders skews highly towards the male spectrum. All these, and countless more, reasons play a part in hindering women's progress forward which would, ultimately, lead to a better developed economy and society' (R3)
	Woman herself	'A woman is not empowered if she can conquer the world, but she is empowered when she understands that she is powerful in every way that she needs to be. She becomes what she detests when she is empowered with motherhood, when it is the time to raise a generation of empowered women and men who respect those women' (R1)
Traditional roles vs. modern roles	Lack of religious knowledge and education Definition varies	'Ignorance, misconstruction of Islamic teachings and fear of Westernization – adopting their values' (R14) 'It depends on the definition of "traditional". In general, the term traditional is taken as synonymous with orthodox, old fashioned, confined by society and doing what is expected of a woman with or without her input. I disagree with the blind following of any belief' (R1)
	Nothing wrong given they are not imposed	'If a woman believes that being traditional and holding the traditions of family is true success then she fulfills that role and I applaud her on her success. But, if she is being forced to do something, even for her own good, then let her be empowered enough to do as she decides as the best action for her' (R4)
	Pragmatic value	'Traditional roles are for pragmatic reasons – responsibilities are divided' (R16)
	Negative	'...against the conventional model; both (males and females) have an equal right to life. No one should be forced to do what they don't want to' (R13)
Gender equality vs. equity	Equality promotes privilege	'The question of the equality of men and women which feminists aim to achieve is meaningless. Men and women possess particular features and characteristics. They are different not equal. Each has certain roles in society not as competing but as complimentary... Equality only promotes privilege. However, both are entitled to have equal opportunities' (R2)
	Leads to chaos	'Feminist movements aim to achieve a sexless society, a society where modesty, chastity and motherhood are scorned, consequently, leading towards confusion and chaos' (R9)
	Gender equity	'Men and women have certain roles and duties that deserve equal amount of respect and appreciation' (R10)
Role of feminists	Positive	'A number of social and political reforms and campaigns have raised issues like domestic violence, abuse, sexual harassment etc, where female rights are highlighted' (R12)
	Negative	'Feminists scorn the traditional roles of women, and downplay the importance of motherhood, upholding Western ideas of liberation....They often push issues too far, and fail to provide adequate solutions' (R40)
	Debatable	'Feminist movements are both necessary and inevitable. However, the efficacy of those is

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		debatable. In recent times, these have resulted in some positive sights, such as the domestic violence bill, etc. However, the problem is continuity and endurance. The movements usually fizzle put before the adequate materializing of constructive developments’ (R3)
	Lack true representation	‘Unfortunately, the advocates of feminist movements in Pakistan come from upper class of the society; they are oblivious to grassroots realities and problems faced by women from the lower strata’ (R6)
	Whistle blowers	‘They are the whistle blowers, not the solution providers’ (R13)
Implications of feminist movements	Lack cultural sensitivity	‘Fault does not lie within the fundamental ideology of feminism but how its concept has been adopted without modification into our society and imposed upon us without taking into account the cultural relativism....objectives of feminist should depend on the circumstances of individual women’ (R8)
	Alienating women	‘Feminist movements seem to be doing more harm than good. They are alienating women from their values. Separating them from their traditional and cultural norms, subsequently making it hard for them to relate and identify with others. Thus, they aren’t seen as part of their society; men look down on them as they perceive them as a threat to their structural organization, while women blame them for distorting the values of society’ (R25)
Ignorance vs. Enlightenment	Enlightenment aids progress	‘Ignorance is never good. Granted, you don't get to know about the sufferings of the world, and thus get to enjoy the assumption that all is well, but in the long run, this is the precise reason for the lack of enlightenment. Until and unless awareness between the masses is increased regarding socio-economic matters, we cannot think about progressing further. Enlightenment aids constructive argumentation, which in return results in development and betterment. Ignorance on the other hand, breeds chauvinism and contempt, further damaging the already brittle state of affairs’ (R18)

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concept of a successful woman. According to the respondents, a successful woman was the one who was self-contented, independent, was aware of her rights, fulfilled her responsibilities, and was able to contribute positively to society – she could either be a mother or a professional woman.

Second important theme that emerged was the idea of liberty. Liberty by the respondents was understood as freedom to express oneself openly and to live life dictated by one’s own principles rather than the ones imposed by external actors or organizations. It was asserted that liberty came with responsibility; one was free to exercise one’s own will as long as it was not harming or violating the rights of others.

According to the respondents, a number of factors impeded the empowerment of women namely, the patriarchal structure of the society, socio-customary practices, lacunae in the prevailing legal framework and procedure, lack of religious knowledge, and illiteracy. While a few of the respondents believed that the only obstacle in women’s liberation was her lack of insight into her abilities and potential. She did not have to leave the house or have a

career to be empowered. Even as a mother she was empowered to contribute to society by raising a responsible next generation.

The traditional role of women, in which they were primarily expected to take care of the family and children, was admired and appreciated by respondents. It was held that the prime responsibility of the woman was her family. However, if the woman was able to manage her family and a job, she should be free to work. While a few of the respondents believed that roles should not be imposed on a woman. She should be given the choice to decide for herself.

All respondents believed that the roles of men and women were not competing but complimentary. Both deserved an equal amount

biological and psychological differences and promoted privilege. Therefore, the goal of feminism should not be to achieve gender equality but gender equity.

The respondents acknowledged the positive role played by feminist movements in Pakistan. Activists raised awareness regarding issues concerning women, created numerous service organizations, helped bring reforms into laws and policies, changed social attitudes towards women, defied conventions, and mobilized

the masses. However, they were criticized for not taking religious and cultural etiquettes, which were inevitably linked to the position of women into consideration. Furthermore, some of the respondents asserted that the advocates of women's rights came from the upper class and criticized them for being unaware of the problems encountered by women from lower strata of society. Subsequently, they were unable to understand their problems or provide adequate solutions.

Most of the respondents believed that in order to bring real change to society, feminists need to consider the socio-cultural factors. They should create an environment which would facilitate women to come out of seclusion and make them feel secure and comfortable in the public domain. The efforts of mainstream feminists to improve the status of women have not been very successful because they failed to take cultural relativism into account.

All the respondents believed that being aware of one's rights, potentials and limitations was important. Though at times, enlightenment may lead to frustration but being aware of one's right and constraints motivated people to take action.

### Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that even though feminist movements have brought important issues to light, raised voice against endless societal and cultural pressures, and brought a number of reforms to laws and policies, their success has been limited. The criticism made against mainstream feminists is that they universalize women's issues without taking into consideration social class. Consequently, they are thought to alienate the women they fight for from their society.

Pakistan is a collectivist society. Collective cultures generally advocate molding of individual goals and interests to accord with the welfare of the larger group and its members, but this is not perceived as repression of the individual (LeFebvre & Franke, 2013). For an Asian woman, her goals are necessitating a balance with those of the family group (Molyneux, 2000).

The traditional roles taken up by women are at times regarded as distasteful by mainstream feminists and perceived as oppression of women (Weedon, 2002). Women in non-Western countries, as a result, are revolting against their traditional roles, are patterning their lives more and more according to the models of Western feminists. In the rejection of the socio-cultural values, indispensable for maintaining the institution of the family, those who support the Women's Liberation Movement are revolting against their own civilization (Wahab, Odunsi, & Ajiboye, 2012).

Mainstream feminists aim to achieve gender equality (i.e., the same set of roles assigned to all members and all given equal opportunities) (Mikkola, 2008). In the case of western feminism, the preferred goals have been those traditionally fulfilled by the male members of the society. The roles of providing financial support, of success in career, and of decision making have been given overwhelming respect and concern, while those dealing with domestic matters, with child care, and with social interrelationships, are devalued (Boyd, Chunn, & Lessard, 2007).

Aguilar (2006) argued that imposition of foreign values in the name of women rights is an expression of intellectual colonialism. External actors cannot judge the status or position of women without understanding the cultural framework from the actor's perspective. Thus, the author warned against the uncritical emulation of Western feminist ideology, and stressed the need to

reject foreign ideas and incorporate nationalism into the feminist agenda.

Likewise, the veil is perceived as oppression against women without truly understanding its concept, subsequently, upholding the stereotype and advancing misunderstanding and hatred towards the religion. Feminists who victimize Muslim women are no different than the patriarchal men they have been fighting against for decades (Akhter, 2012). Hoodfar (1997) provided a powerful illustration of how cultural and normative traditions provide women opportunities to secure rights and protect them in ways that may be seen as oppression by Western feminists. The author noted that the use of the veil among Cairene women not only protects them, but paradoxically increased control over their lives. The veil was used as a shield against harassment and was seen as a sign of affiliation with traditional values.

The reality is that there are different expressions of feminism because women in different countries have different priorities. And for some Muslim women, the Western feminist movement has become too narrowly identified with issues that are not their top priorities (Weiss, 2012). Many of the goals of feminism as conceived in Western society are not necessarily relevant across cultural boundaries. Therefore, feminists should keep class, cultural and religious differences in mind while devising strategies or proposing solutions in an effort to reduce discrimination and injustice against women. If feminist ideas and reforms are in opposition to indigenous values – that form an important part of cultural and religious heritage – they end up exploiting and alienating the very women they purport to protect.

### Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that literati in Pakistan tend to view the feminist movement with some apprehension. A number of social, psychological, and cultural traditions govern their thinking, which is particularly affective of woman's status and role in the society, and hence, affecting the way they respond to feminist ideas. Understanding these would help gain insight into conditions and struggles of individual women. Furthermore, feminists in Pakistan need to fight gender oppression within the religious and cultural model of society. Shah (2014) adhered that a women's rights movement can succeed only when it mirrors the makeup of the society. Perhaps if feminists worked within the fabric of cultural and religious traditions of Pakistan, the position they hold in society would be much higher.

### Suggestions

Future studies may explore age and gender related differences in the phenomenon of feminism. In addition, research on a larger scale can be replicated to incorporate views of different segments of society.

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