

**Research article**

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# Women's Activism in Pakistan: Role of Religious Nationalism and Feminist Ideology Among Self-Identified Conservatives and Liberals

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**Abstract:** This paper explores women's activism and political engagement in contemporary Pakistan. In this exploration with self-identified liberal and conservative groups of women, emerged their experiences and narratives about *Feminism* and *Nationalism* with a common moderator being *religious affiliations*. In this qualitative and phenomenological exploration, the informants belonged to various self-identified liberal and conservative women-led organizations. To this end, 20 women (age-range 23-48 years) were interviewed. Results indicated that gender roles and feminism were seen very differently between the two groups; gender and national identity were closely associated with Islamic values and there was a negative association between nationalism and feminist ideology. Women from liberal organizations, mostly feminists, emphasized pro-public-sphere engagement of women, rebelling against religious fundamentalism. On the contrary, many self-reported conservative women proclaimed nationalist, anti-feminists (they did not identify as Islamic feminists) and pro-private-sphere engagement of women. Many of the liberal informants complained about Pakistan's misogynistic society and hurdles they faced in demanding equal opportunities for women. This research has implications for gender equality and female identity in the context of nationalism, women's mobility and entitlement to the public sphere. The study also has applied significance for prejudices and stereotypes that make it difficult for women, to break away from fixed categories of gender role expectations. This paper informs academics and practitioners on socially and politically engaged Pakistani women's views regarding these narratives. The study concluded that women's activism is influenced by their religious views and their religious interpretation of feminism and nationalism in Pakistani society.

**Keywords:** Feminism and Nationalism; Feminism in Pakistan; Religious Nationalism; Gender Equality

## Introduction

In the Muslim world, it seems that nationalism is a masculine enterprise, not only that men are portrayed as the protectors, women are subdued to praise them and be in supporting roles (Elias, 2008; Anjum, Kamal & Bilwani, 2019). Nowhere can this be witnessed better than every year on the 14<sup>th</sup> August, Pakistan's Independence Day celebrations. The songs that echo in one's ears range from Pakistan-India wars (Noor Jehan's songs) to penultimate motivational songs for the Pakistani Army. Although some scholars see this interpretation of masculinity used in nationalism studies problematic (Elias, 2008). All of which reminds us

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of how the nation's men have always defended the holy motherland whereby these songs portray nation's women silently beaming with pride and praying for their men who are fighting at the borders. This relation between masculine strength, feminine need for protection is strongly impacted by the national narrative deeply embedded in Islamic values. This exhibits a deep relationship between nationalism, religion, and masculinity. This exaggerated masculinity calls for an exploration on how feminism is and experienced in Pakistan.

Nagel (1998) provides a thorough analysis of this relationship between masculinity and nationalism by posing a deceptively simple question: 'why do men and women appear to have very different goals and agendas for the 'nation?'' (pp. 242). She argues that the relationship between womanhood and nationalism is such that women are excluded from the frontline in the making of the nations. She argues that the reason why women often seemed to be missing from the nationalist archives is that these nationalist enterprises are 'masculinist projects, involving masculine institutions, masculine processes and masculine activities' (pp. 243). According to this paradigm, a 'micro-culture of masculinity' fits very well with nationalist narratives.

In a more recent study conducted in Pakistan by Zia (2018) the relevance of secular feminist activism is explored among working-class women's activism movements across the country. Zia (2018) argues that Muslim women's Islamic piety (not Islamic feminism) is no threat to the dominant political patriarchy. However, those who are being labeled as liberals (feminists), who demand secular autonomy and transformative changes for the nation and are seen as challenging Muslim male dominance. Zia argues that there are limits to Muslim women's piety, and there is a need to promote the potential for females' autonomy and liberal freedoms.

## Theoretical Conceptualization: Nationalism in Relation to Feminist ideology

Upreti (2006) has theorized that Nationalism has been conceptualized as a state of manifestation of certain ideological goals, which people wish to realize through unified efforts, which is strongly rooted in the attitudes of people. It can be argued that nationalism is an ideological instrument adhered by a group for the attainment of their political goals. Therefore, how the nationalistic aspirations of a group are used would depend on the objectives behind those aspirations (Upreti, 2006). According to Jayawardena and de Alwis (1996), many nationalist movements have used women as cultural representatives. As many feminists have pointed out, women were constructed as 'Mothers of the Nation' and their biological role as reproducers of the nation was highlighted to sustain structural disparities. It is for this reason that gender and feminism become central to understanding religious nationalism especially in the Muslim countries (also see Zia, 2018).

Nationalism emerged in Pakistan as soon as it appeared as an independent country at the partition of India in 1947. As this making of the country was based on the plea that Muslims constituted a distinct Islamic ideology-based identity, so even before the country was formed it had a strong element of Islamic Nationalism because religion was the basis of a separate country for the Muslims of the subcontinent. Hence religion has always been the basis of Nationalism debates in Pakistanis. Simultaneously, the Pakistani ruling elite had constantly promoted religious and masculine (non-egalitarian) bases of nationalism due to the decline of democratic institutions, rise of military dictatorship, failed development and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism (Khan, 2002). After 1975, more than ever before, the Pakistani rulers began to promote Islamization and fundamentalism for their own political interests. It further narrowed down the religious contents of Pakistani nationalism (Upreti, 2006; Khan, 2002).

According to Cynthia Enloe (1990), male theorists rarely felt moved to explore how nationalism is associated with gender power. In her book, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, she argues that women are not given importance and are downgraded to minor roles in nationalist movements. They are represented either as signs of nationhood, to be defended and elevated, or as the spoils of conflicts, and to be disgraced in the name of honor. In both cases, the real conquerors are men who are defending their homeland, and thus their women's honor. Enloe argued that the connection between nationalism and elevated masculinity

could only be understood through a feminist lens.

Scholars like Renan (1996) have argued that overemphasizing the essence of a nation lies in creating shared aims among members of the declared national community and forgetting their dissimilarities. Others such as Luxemburg (1976) criticized how the concept of ‘the nation’ as a homogenous social entity. He called it a “misty veil” to hide the hostile interests of its privileged members to an extent that nationalism creates unequal circumstances.

In the case of conservative nations, the less privileged could be women and especially women who would disagree with traditional norms. Such uneven benefits to some people living in the country promote narrow and non-egalitarian nationalist assertions that benefit only men of the nation (Hobsbawm, 1990). Scholars argue that it has been actively curbing gender equality voices and hence feminism (Anjum et al., 2019; Rana, 2012; Zia, 2018). Other research has also proposed that culture-based honor norms (Anjum et al., 2019) and traditional caretaking norms (Khalid & Anjum, 2019) also interfere with equal treatment of women in countries like Pakistan. Muslim societies are also often associated with collectivistic and conservative cultures. Such cultural association of Pakistani society may lead to further conservative values and traditional self-categorization of Muslim identity as an honor code (see Anjum, Kessler & Aziz, 2019).

## Feminism, Nationalism and Islam

This topic critically centers around debates relating to female’s participation in political domains, family reforms, and the variant prescriptions of Islam across countries and cultures (Anjum, Aziz, Chilton & Zahid, 2017). The question of feminism - women’s roles and rights - is mostly a tussle between two levels in the Islamic world, firstly against the society’s forces of conservatism and secondly the outcomes it will have on the country’s political structure. The clash between rising conservatism and gender equality has become a growing concern among feminist groups living as minority Muslim groups even outside inside predominantly non-Muslim countries. According to Hussain (2007), In India, a greater control has been imposed on women by fundamentalists in the name of the religion. Regardless of religion, generally national identity debates revolve around the politics of controlling women. Within the fundamentalist’s claim regarding their public search for Islamic identity, their practices affect women’s access to public spheres, legislative systems, and family codes.

The Muslim world has undergone a noteworthy revolution regarding feminist movements during the Twentieth century. There has been a modernization of laws concerning education, politics, and business but still, the status of women has not been brought forward and religion is raised whenever it is the matter of women’s rights. There is a serious concern in handling the political and religious manipulation of women’s identity and autonomy by the right-wing political groups leading to discrimination against women (Hussain, 2007 p.69).

Throughout history, leaders have appropriated women for nation-building purposes. Discourses of Islamization, along with Islamic fundamentalism very often intercede the discourses of nationhood and gender in Pakistan, and the intersection of the three effects on Pakistani women (Cook, 2001). Zia’s regime of “Islamisation” was initiated by right-wing religious organizations such as the Jama’at-I-Islami. They claimed that “modern” was a Western imperialist tool which should be averted with gender segregation in a proper Islamic society in which “Islamisation policies reinforced the ideal of women’s segregation in the home.” (Cook, 2001. p.33.). Authors such as Afia Zia (2018) have argued that despite the end of General Zia’s Era, Islamist terrorism in Pakistan is still there and its impacts and intensity is not gone. In some areas, the impacts are more pronounced than others i.e. in Balochistan. Furthermore, the radical Islamist groups still have a stronghold and are flourishing under Pakistani state’s acquiescence i.e. the Tehrik Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah.

Research has shown that religious fundamentalism has played a crucial role in promoting xenophobia and traditional gender roles and conservative social values (see, Bermanis, Canettinism & Pedahzur, 2004). Right-wing extremism is seen as a secular phenomenon and religious fundamentalism is thought to have religious roots, however, these two phenomena are found to overlap extensively in traditional societies.

For instance, right-wing extremist parties in Israel have reinforced the segregation between Jew and Arabs, excluding the Arabs, so much so that they have used references from Bible and other religious authorities to validate their ideology. With regard to gender roles and traditional values, conservative attitudes are evident among these parties as women are seen as destined for motherhood. Hence, the ideology of right-wing extremists cannot be seen in isolation from religious fundamentalism.

According to Mohanty (2009), religious nationalism and fundamentalism have spawned a militant brand of Islam in Pakistan in recent years. The politicization of Islam has produced fundamentalism that stands in contradiction to the religious liberties and political freedoms of the rest of the world. Religious loyalties are very much melded in the concept of nationalist fundamentalism. By preaching puritan Islam, disciplinarians run the risk of pushing Muslim youths to the thin line that divides fundamentalism and terrorism. According to comprehensive research conducted by United States Institute of Peace (USIP, 2014), surveys and focus groups, and interviews over the years with youths indicate that Pakistani Youths' radicalization is the product of an exclusively Islamic identity that defines their nationalism too. Groups that thrive on an exclusive Islamic identity exploit this identity. Youth is vulnerable to becoming connected with more radical organizations and concepts.

## Context and Rationale of the Study

Nationalist discourses are gendered in Muslim countries like Pakistan due to the strongly intertwined status of women and religious values. Most of the political spaces and national discourses are religious and are exclusively for men (Jamal 2005). In recent accounts of the relationship between Islam and women, Pakistani women's activism in political and religious movements is on the rise. Such debates are becoming popular in feminist political literature which seeks to understand and explain the position of Muslim women as activists. Sometimes, Pakistani feminist scholarship on women is referred to in the literature as fundamentalist (Jamal 2005; also see Zia 2018). For some, it can be a lasting ambiguity, on the one hand retaining a hold on their feminist (secular, universal humanist) selves and, on the other hand, to challenge Orientalist dichotomies of Islamic and Western.

Among liberal circles of Pakistan, women's organizations have been actively working towards eliminating religious and cultural impediments to advocate for and pursue justice and equality for Muslim women. Feminist politics in Pakistan has been trying to grapple with the issue of fragmented, polarizing identities in relation to religious identities for many years (Zia, 2009). While events like *Aurat March 2018* and *Women on Bikes* prove women's resistance and that progress is taking place, but it surely is slow.

Moreover, the backlash such initiatives receive is another indication that we haven't achieved inclusion yet. Hence, such studies are needed to explore the formation of feminist gender identity to assess the role that nationalism plays in this formation. In addition, the study is novel in the way it is conceptualized and contextualized as far as timing and Islamic culture of Pakistan is concerned. Despite this being the case, there are next to no studies related to the intersection of gender roles and nationalism and activism in the context of liberal and conservative females. It was important to highlight the reasons for those factors that inhibit female activists from contributing to real world issue of Pakistan.

Based on the review of the literature, there is a need to explore the ways in which Pakistani female activists perceive and project their gender roles, feminism, and their relationship with religion and nationalism. To this end, female led organizations' active members were engaged to reconnoiter on these missing links. The study hence aimed at exploring women's activism and political engagement in contemporary Karachi, a city with more than 25 million inhabitants and much of the religious and political diversity. More specifically, the study explored the perceptions and experiences of women regarding *Feminist ideology* and *Nationalism* and This paper aimed at informing on socially and politically influential Pakistani women view these themes.

## Method

The key exploratory question was, “what are the ways in which female activists from the liberal and conservative organizations perceive and project their gender roles, feminist ideology, and nationalism.” A qualitative methodology with in-depth interviews based on Interpretive Phenomenology Analyses (IPA; see Creswell, 2007) was used to undertake this exploration.

## Sample

The selection of our subjects for interviews was based on the position they held within society and how impactful they have been in shaping the narrative of other women. To this end, 20 women between the age-range of 23 to 48 years old were interviewed. Participants belonged to grassroots emancipator movements, women-led voluntary associations, female producers of cultural texts, performers, installations, artworks, religious and nationalist organizations, and Madrassas from Karachi, Pakistan. As an inclusion category, only those participants were interviewed who had been involved in their organizations or their work for more than 2 years at the least. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants (see Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Previous research has recommended use of IPA in interpersonal and organizational context that is based on lived experiences of the females (Anjum et al., 2019). The categories and our participants are listed below:

Category 1: Ten participants from women-led self-identified liberal organizations were interviewed. These informants represented key organizations working for women’s economic empowerment through education, skill learning, innovative entrepreneurship, health associations, artists, writers, and non-traditional sportspersons.

Category 2: Ten participants from women-led self-identified conservative organizations were interviewed. These informants represented organizations working for women’s education, religious learning, Madrassas, and grassroots Islamic campaigners.

## Interview guideline

Based on the literature review, a core set of themes was identified to commence the interviews. The appendix shows the key questions asked during the interviews. The interviews consisted of introductions followed by tentative questions based on an interview guideline that was evolved and changed during interviews. Overall themes always touch-based the participants’ ideology, gender identity, and feminism, views regarding nationalism, religion, and fundamentalism. The interviews consisted of introductions followed by tentative questions based on interview guideline that was evolved and changed during interviews.

## Procedure

To conduct the interviews, the participants were contacted in-person, via email, telephone calls and messages. The participants were informed about the research and were asked for permission to meet and interview them. In 4 cases, questions were provided before interviewing them as they had requested to receive the questions in written format. Upon receiving their consents and agreement to participate anonymously, arrangements were made to meet in person at the place of their convenience. As the interview was semi-structured so the questions were asked in the order that fitted the context. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes to an hour-long bilingual interaction (English and Urdu). All interviews were conducted at places that were proposed by the participants for safety and convenience reasons. Interviews were transcribed and a composite description incorporating all experiences was created. Based on IPA, participants’ quotes were provided as descriptions as representative voices of the participants (see Creswell, 2007; Ponterotto, 2006;

Khalid & Anjum, 2019).

## Results

All participants spoke about their perceptions and experiences of gender roles, feminism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism in Pakistan. Using interpretive Phenomenological Analyses (IPA), 526 distinct and thematically meaningful statements were identified. Two independent research assistants categorized these statements using two overarching themes and multiple sub-themes. The transcripts were reviewed twice, once after each interview and then after completion of all interviews. The protocol for generating deeper insight and clearer meaning was employed (see, Moustakas, 1994). Meaningful experiences were identified as non-overlapping discrete and elaborated experiences of the participants (Khalid & Anjum 2019). The two overarching themes were: *Perceptions of Feminism and Religious Nationalism in Pakistan*, and *Coping Strategies Used by Women Against Social Frictions*. Results were presented and discussed under these themes in order to understand the complex question of how gender, feminism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism impact Pakistani women. Within each theme, there are multiple subthemes that were common as well as distinct for the two categories of the participating groups. Italicized texts are direct quotes of participants, they are stated with participant category (1=Liberal; 2=Conservative) and anonymous Participants in each category were indicated with a numeric identification number (1-10).

## Perceptions of Feminism and Religious Nationalism in Pakistan

All women were personally committed to the mission of their organizations' liberal or conservative agendas.

### Traditional Gender Roles and Misogyny

Regarding gender roles and rights, the views and experiences for women from the two categories were very different. For instance, most women from Category-1 thought that the idea of equality is simple and yet there are so many hurdles in the way of its understanding and implementation.

*"I am completely against the gender roles that men are the providers and the women are the caretakers and nurturers. I have broken these roles with the support of my husband who is the primary caregiver of our daughter because I work longer hours than him. I wish that these gender roles were balanced with women and men both working and taking care of the family. Gender roles are ruining lives of women all over."* (Category-1, informant-3)

*"Women's roles are quite clear. What I do not understand is the whole issue of some women focusing on making our women outspoken and the debates about why society is not letting us free. Women need to earn honor and respect; freedom will not make them happy, respect will. They are given respect in Islam; a true Muslim respects his wife. We need to understand the reasons; Islam is being misunderstood by non-Muslims across the globe who view Islam in a negative light without even realizing that there is nothing more peaceful and rewarding than the Islamic values."* (Category-2, Informant-9)

### Understanding of Feminism

Liberal participants projected feminism as a force for social equality, whereas representatives of conservative communities perceived feminism as unreal and not needed:

*"I understand feminism for what it is, a movement for equality and take it to be as a drive for political, economic, and social equality for all sexes. I am a feminist and I don't believe in mending the terminology to suit one's own gain or just adding the label to look cool without understanding or acknowledging all the hard work and sacrifices women all around the world have put into creating and establishing this movement."* (Category-1, Participant-5)

*“When we have a flawless framework offered by Quran and Sunnah for how women should or should not behave, I believe that we do not need to look toward the West for how women should be treated. We have to understand the Quran better to know our responsibilities as women”.* (Category-2, Informant-1)

## Defying Obedience and Structural Barriers

This theme emerged only among women from category 1. Two major reasons for women to join liberal organizations were to promote their causes were defying the inequalities away from socio-cultural norms.

*“I am fighting the sickening thinking in our society about an obedient doctor daughter-in-law who will be happy not practicing as a doctor and serving the household through the care of her family. I provide opportunities to married women who are not allowed to finish their medical residency due to an abusive marriage. I was sent abroad where despite being highly qualified, I lived with my husband and a son. After getting a divorce and moving back to Pakistan, I started working to support women and expand their horizons by breaking norms.”* (Category-1, Informant-1)

Some of the informants also highlighted how the role of the state in providing opportunities to women is missing and hindering feminist perspectives.

*“The understanding of feminism in terms of equal opportunities especially in the poor segment of the society is low, we never see government addressing this issue. There is no infrastructure to support women - all structures and practices are serving to men’s needs. The state is rather promoting an Islamic type of nationalism which is quite the opposite of equality for all. It is important to challenge the state’s stance. We cannot be blind patriots if we wish for the development of Pakistan.”* (Category-1, Informant-6)

## Religion as a force in personal and public spheres

Among the members of category 1, many participants had very neutral views of religion, whereas, participants from category 2 were more supportive of the use of religion in public domain.

*“Our societies believe that everything can be obtained and fixed on the basis of religion, it is untrue. Religion should be practiced in the private spheres; we have to stop using it in the public domains. Before my divorce I believed whatever was taught, but after I faced a lot of backlash on the decision to get a divorce on the basis of religion, I had to rethink about it. It is difficult to change religious views until religion is controlled and monitored by the few select groups that have been monitoring it in our societies, such as the mullahs.”* (Category-1, Informant-7)

*“Islam guides our life in the most holistic way. It not only guides us in our personal matters like our duties to our families, but it is a complete guiding system for private lives and public lives. Religion can be a source for guiding citizens and until it is in the hands of those who properly understand religion.”* (Category-2, Informant-5)

## Women as Agents of Nation Making

Many participants strongly believed that women play a huge role in the making of a nation.

*“In my experience, women are definitely the backbone of the nation, and they play an extremely crucial role. There’s a very famous saying that if you educate a woman, you educate a nation so, in this sense, they are really the backbone of the nation but for that, we need to liberate our women.”* (Category-1, Informant-4).

Most of the interviews with the members of the conservative organizations perched Islam’s way as the only way for saving the nation:

*“Tablegh (preaching Islam/ calling people towards Islam) is something that every Muslim should do. Eventually, we all need to preach every woman to live by piety because that is what is needed to save our nation... There is nothing as important as the social issues like Islamic education and pious marriage. Our family duties are prescribed by Islam because women are the primary caretakers of the home and raise children in a way that we can make a strong Islamic nation.”* (Category-2, Informant-10)

### Intersectionality of Gender Identity, Feminism, Muslim Identity and Nationalism

*“Nationalism in Pakistan is conflated with religion because even the name of the country refers to that. But in Pakistan, religion is a game of interpretations, and here the dominant interpretation of religion is that the private sphere is for the women while the public space isn't. While this is a religious issue, in the context of Pakistan this becomes a national issue.”* (Category-1, Informant-10)

*“Through Aurat March, the first step towards resilience was taken which was to make people aware of the issue. Various people who attended the March might not all hold the same liberal feminist views, however, the March did help them confront such issues head-on and to start conversations about our women's rights in the public discourse.”* (Category-1, Informant-5)

*“In Pakistan religious-nationalism and oppression of women goes hand in hand. Many are against the notion of right-wing nationalism. I am a huge proponent of religion based on totalitarianism and emotional violence against women and minorities. A nation is conceived as patriarchal family, which also portrays the idea of women needing protection because we're talking about these cohesive families where the roles are pre-determined. Men are supposed to protect women and the roles of women are also pre-determined in the sense that they have to reproduce etc. I think it kind of takes away the right and freedom of women.”* (Category-1, Informant-8).

## Coping Strategies Used by Women Against Social Frictions

Women from Category-1 compared to women from the conservative camp employed many more coping strategies.

### Finding religious justifications

*“Social hierarchies are a natural way through which societies evolve and perform better. That is why it is my personal preference to be associated with Jamaat -i-Islami (a conservative political party), they have a concrete ideology. As an Islamic state, the law should strictly follow the sharia (Islamic law). One cannot separate Islam and nation, and that is a good thing! Where nationalism contradicts Islamic law, I would move away from nationalistic ideas.”* (Category-2, informant-4)

*“Islam is to every Muslim female what a heart is to a body; keeps us alive and active. Every minor to major decisions in my life are based on Islamic teachings. In certain roles, Islam gives a superior status to men and in other roles women are superior to men- making them equally superior in their own ways. For example, men are supposed to be superior to women when it comes to protecting women as God has made men as the protectors (qawwamun) for women and women are considered superior when it comes to giving birth to a child as God has given a much higher status to a mother than a father.”* (Category-2, informant-3)

## Recognition of Marginalized Identity and Empowering Other Women

All women essentially felt they were contributing something beyond themselves and being meaningful to their community.

*“I feel empowered for enabling women to become leaders; not to just be aware of their rights but be aware of the possibilities they can achieve in life. The future holds in developing our women in all fields so that workplace discrimination can be controlled ASAP.”* (Category-1, Informant-9)

*“Investing in females is the future as they have missed out many years in Pakistan due to inequality and marginalization. There are many girls like Malala Yousufzai in our populous, but they are untapped due to constructed social factors which benefit only males. We must leave these stereotypes behind to move ahead and trust the qualities of women. We provide an adequate platform for females to grow”.* (Category-1, Informant-5)

## Resilience Building and Mentorship

*“Our area is full of brutal people; we are treated here as a commodity. Women are bought and sold here, and no one cares, so we have to be strong ourselves. I always wanted to learn self-defense, after joining this boxing club, learning self-defense turned into my passion of boxing. Now I teach boxing lessons to girls at different school located in different areas.”* (Anonymous, Informant-2)

*“Women can be made strong candidates for all kind of offices and activities, all they need is good role models and strong mentoring by other females. This is the only way to propel our women forward. This is exactly what we aim at, give them assistance and mentorship. Resilient women lead to community welfare as a final result.”* (Category-1, Informant-1)

## Promoting Humanitarianism over Religion

Among the women on the left, the struggles and outcomes were more oriented towards humanitarian grounds or humanism philosophy. Most participants also requested that their or their organization’s names should be kept confidential whenever there was a discussion regarding religion.

*“In my work for creating safe spaces for women I am inclined more towards humanitarian than to the religion. My attitude towards religions has been challenged several times. The purity of the religion can be prescribed but I find Muslims have corrupted the religion. Even if religion itself was a good entity, even without it one can serve equal values and growth of women. In our culture, our minorities including women suffer at the hands of religion and want to help minorities.”* (Category-1, Informant-10)

*“I really do not want to comment on religion that much. I can express what I feel, which is not that great so I will not say how I feel. Also, I do not possess enough knowledge to speak on any matter related to religion. We should serve to humans not to followers of one religion. It is disappointing that the people in power in Pakistan often use religion as a tool to impose on and restrict women in many different ways. No one, should use religion to cripple the force residing inside women.”* (Category-1, Informant-3)

## Disengagement from Politics and Religion

Many representatives of liberal category expressed disengagement from political and religious groups:

*“I am a patriotic person who loves and supports her country, however, I would hate to affiliate myself with any political or religious party as they are not sincere... The change I so desperately want to see in this nation are equal opportunities for all genders, manipulation of contacts, bribery, equal rights for all minorities, community colleges for less privileged and better schools for differently abled students.”* (Category-1, Informant-3)

*“We agree that Islam asks us to wear hijab, so we wear it. But it is written nowhere that a woman can’t box. Beyond that we do not get into religious explanations. We do not get into political slogans. We just believe that women are no less than men, I believe that there are many men out there who can’t compete with us. We aim to make our families and country proud by following our passion for Boxing”.* (Anonymous, Informant-2)

## Hope for Positive Change

*“I am hopeful that now with religious education is picking pace in Karachi, I will be able to engage more women to become pious and they can spread the word to their families and masses. There are many newer Islamic channels and Madrassas, so future will be safer for our Muslim state and women.”* (Category-2, informant-7)

*“Pakistan has great potential (youth) to reach great new heights. Our youth still has the courage to smile and not frown and that is what makes any nation strong. There are hurdles we need to get over first to achieve an egalitarian society for all. Hurdles such as self-doubt, lack of confidence, judgement and biases are what stand in our way. This nation’s youth needs time. I am sure egalitarian and non-nationalist Pakistan for women is possible.”* (Category-1, informant-8)

## Discussions

This project explores how female Pakistani activists from the liberal and conservative organizations experience, gender identity, feminism and religious nationalism in Karachi, Pakistan. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with women from the two categories of activism. The findings indicate that depending on which side of political and religious beliefs the participants stood had an impact on their perceptions and experiences of the constructs explored in this study. While women from liberal organizations were defying stereotypical roles and obedience when they responded to themes related to feminism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism in Pakistan.

Overall, the results showed that there was a dichotomy of perceptions attitudes towards gender identity, feminism, and religious norms and there was an intersectionality with nationalism in Pakistan. All women in both categories talked about their experiences and personal involvement in the work their organizations do regarding perceptions, gendered attitudes and feminism and were personally committed for activism pursuing their ideology (conservative as well as liberal agendas).

Regarding egalitarian gender roles in the national context of Pakistan, the views and experiences for women from the two categories were very different. For instance, most women from Category 1 thought that the idea of equality is simple and yet there are so many hurdles the way of its understanding and implementation. Women from Category 2 perceived that their religion gave them equality, and that equality was maintained in the private sphere. However, they expressed that women in Pakistani culture and those in the West did not understand this equality. These results revealed women who were more liberal in the sense that they promoted the rights of women and wanted to see themselves and other women as not just limited to private spaces but rather in the public space where they can, without any restriction, pursue and be whatever they desire. These results support the notion of equality and agency that females find through access to public space (Jayawardena & de Alwis, 1996; Miller, 2016; Parashar, 2010).

The findings of this study are also consistent with those of Nagel (1998) and Ramaswamy (2001). As indicated in their analyses, liberal informants in this study have realized and promoted equal rights for both the genders but also worked for its application. The participants basically are feminists who are fighting for the oppression that women everyday face and are trying to give a voice to those who have been silenced. They perceived and experienced misogyny in Pakistani society as the foremost reason why women are considered to be inferior to men. They believed that women start demeaning and ridiculing other women, who adopt stereotypically inconsistent behaviors and go beyond the norms, internalize misogyny. Therefore, not only men but also women criticized other women who step out in the public space either to achieve something professionally or to bring about a positive change. Misogyny and the notion of authoritarian attitude combined leads to restricting women to their homes and are not allowed to participate in the public and political spaces. These findings resonate with Jayawardena and de Alwis (1996) who argued that women are used through stereotypical gender norms.

As argued by previous research that nationalism is a product of Muslim gender identity (see Khan, 2002), most informants from the conservative category of this study believed that as an Islamic state the laws of Islam should be strictly observed. They promoted self-proclaimed conservative ideals of women's roles. According to them, there is only one type of Islam in which there is no acceptance of any new ideas and women's freedom is going to make them less respectable. For none of these informants their religious ideology was too orthodox in terms the need of the time or gendered notions and fundamental religious rhetoric.

Most women from conservative organizations stated that Islam is the ultimate source of guidance as it gives equally deserving roles to both men and women. They supported and justified the idea that men and women should have strict gender roles rather than letting them decide roles for themselves. This fits with the conceptual framework offered by Enloe (1990). Additionally, they affirmed and favored right-wing nationalism due to its reservations about things like music, alcohol, adultery etc. Most replies to almost all the questions regarding nationalism implied that women are encouraged to stay at home and look after the kids and not show any involvement in the politics of the country.

Moreover, many participants immediately connected religion and the political arena of Pakistan. Conservative religious participants were more likely to be supportive of right-wing anti-feminist views as well as Islamic orthodox nationalism. It can be argued that religious fundamentalism does promote a right-wing attitude as gender roles are restricted; certain things that only a woman is supposed to do and certain things that only a man should do. What is important to understand here is the role of religion and how it can be seen shaping a conservative attitude not only for women but also for nation formation. These findings are consistent with speculations by Luxemburg (1976).

The study also supports the idea that in Islamic nationalism like the one prevalent in Pakistan, the center of gravity is masculinity, men are fulfilling all the lead roles whereas women are just the support system (Anjum et al., 2018). However, most conservative participants agreed that the role women play is rightly supportive of that of men; by not entering the political battlefields or fighting wars, they are raising kids who can and will fight for their nation. Regarding the use of coping strategies, it was noteworthy that among women from Category 2, there was more consensus that they were not facing any social or cultural problems and hence they did not need many coping strategies. The only dominant themes were religious justifications and hope for more religious nationalism. However, the struggles that liberal women experienced needed many more coping strategies for their and their organizations' survival. For instance, the common strategies for these women included resilience building, mentorship of younger women to build resistance, distancing themselves from religion, to name a few.

It was interesting to see that most conservative participants used religion as a coping strategy for justifying their beliefs and behaviors, however this was not the case among liberal participants. Liberal women were more hesitant when they commented on religion. On the question of religion's role, some said that Islam is a religion that gives equal rights to men and women and also gives independence to women. But on the topic of religious fundamentalism they had to say that there are forces in the country, which follow traditions and customs without even questioning them. These are the sort of extremes that the religion itself warns against. Hence, they believed such fundamentalism does not allow society to become more gender egalitarian and hence, they were aware of such thinking and did not promote or support it. This notion is common in the work of Upreti (2006).

Another common coping strategy was mentoring the youth. This coping mechanism was used by liberal women to prepare younger women to fight against marginalization in the masculine context of Pakistan, and they had hope in younger people. Women from both categories had high hopes that the future holds better prospects for their activist. While liberal women have a hope that the youth is the future of Pakistan and they will be more focused on liberal ideology, simultaneously, conservatives have high hopes that religious teachings and practices are on the rise in Karachi.

It was notable that women from self-identified liberal circles preferred a humanitarian approach for dealing with social issues rather than religious approaches, however, they didn't disregard the significance of religion. Many had adopted a middle ground might be for avoiding guilt as former research indicates that females are more prone to guilt when they are perceived to be going against the tide (Anjum et al., 2018). If they choose the mainstream narrative, then they evidently be standing on the side of the oppressor. But if they stand on the humanitarian side which is more inclined towards the so called 'Western' standards then they might compromise their national identity.

The findings of this study regarding struggles of female led and female empowerment programs corroborate with previous research in Pakistan conducted by Jafar (2004), arguing on the relationship between women led initiatives and religious fundamentalism. Jafar argued that Islamic fundamentalism poses challenges to such initiatives through fundamentalism and extremism and most NGOs have to strategize their responses to counter fundamentalism while working in Pakistan. This research also proposes structural changes in the access and position of women in Pakistan. Furthermore, there is a robust need for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working for women issues to collaborate on these structural changes because together that can counter the pressures they face in contexts like Pakistan.

## Contributions and Implications

There are several significant contributions and implications of current study in the Muslim contexts in general and in the context of Pakistan in particular. Firstly, while trying to understand how gender identity is played out in an Islamic nationalist space, which strives to propagate an exclusionary narrative, the study uncovers different layers such as religion, mobility, and prejudices and stereotypes that make it difficult for females to break away from fixed categories of gender role expectations. Unless nationalist discourses become welcoming to women, we cannot hope to build a society that accommodates and celebrates different groups. This study suggests that for progress, the control that has been imposed on women by fundamentalists needs to be questioned. We need to question the national identity debates revolving around the politics of religion and tactics of controlling women in Pakistani society.

The second important contribution of this study is that these findings complement a growing body of empirical research and theoretical approaches to extremism, especially religious fundamentalism, that emphasize the significance of psychological processes as risk factors (see Ellis & Abdi, 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2014). Hence, the findings signify that the needs fulfilled by religio-national narratives and conservative identity have to be scrutinized and challenged in order for women to be able to flourish.

Most importantly, this research serves to highlight these issues from the perspective of the stakeholders themselves, that is: by asking women who are directly involved in the process of forming women's identity. This study brings to light the issues that have been brushed under the carpet and often overlooked because they are difficult to talk about. Often because women are not willing to ask these questions and hold discussions, due to fear of subverting the current system which benefits masculinity, their journey is prolonged and the destination for gender-equality is moving faraway.

It was notable that many members of the organizations working as grassroots movements engaged in helping mostly destitute women. By improving their economic position in the society, they promoted economic and social egalitarianism. They are critical of the state's inert position in promoting gender equality and argue that if the state does something helpful for promoting gender equality and provides equal opportunity to all genders, then this gap will continue to grow bigger. Simultaneously, there are also those who praise the government's efforts but currently they don't see anything of the sort being done. Hence, they will hold their position of being critical of the state.

Finally, this study is vital in initiating the debate on how women's role is integral to national development as they are equal fate holder of the future of their country. They want the pro-creationist narrative to be changed soon if we aspire progressive and a women friendly country. According to the World Economic Forum's 2017 report on Global Gender Gap, Pakistan ranked 143 out of 144 in the world. Hence, the social and economic conditions for women in Pakistan are the worst. Hence, there is a huge need for as women constitute half of the population and we need to highlight women's contributions to the country's development and provide them safe spaces. This role has to be made overt and more appreciated in order to break through misogynistic societal norms.

## Possible Caveats

In addition to the contribution, this study also has caveats that need to be considered before generalizing these findings to all female activists. Conceptually speaking, conservatism and religious nationalism cannot possibly be the only reason for differences in experiences and coping strategies of the two camps. Moreover, many Muslims women from the conservative camps may disagree with the results of this study and may not endorse the beliefs expressed by the participants included in this study.

Another key limitation is that the study relied on a snowball sampling technique, which made it unclear if the results can be generalized to all Muslim women more broadly. Nonetheless, it is important to note that most underrepresented groups are less easily accessible. Therefore, despite this obvious limitation, snowball sampling is vital and remains one of the very few ways to access populations like self-identified liberals and conservatives.

## Conclusion

Summing up, this project explores the ways in which liberal and conservative female Pakistani activists perceive and experience gender roles, feminism, nationalism and religious norms in Pakistan. Many liberal female activists and artists expressed deviance while they took a stance against religious and misogynist nationalism in Pakistani culture. The results revealed that women whose work defied right wing nationalism promoted the rights of women and wanted to see women as equal and empowered individuals. They wanted to claim public space where they can, without any restriction, pursue and be whatever they desire to be. In conclusion, these findings have strong implications for the gender equality debate in Pakistan.

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