Women's Online Activism in Pakistan: Navigating Religious and Societal Constraints on Gender Identity

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the disputed narratives regarding women's identity and public space in Pakistani society, as reflected in the ideological struggle between traditionalist and non-traditionalist power blocs. The primary objective of this research is to explore how group-based threat feelings shape the narrative and counter-narrative of gender rights, feminism, and religious identity in Pakistan. The study also aspires to analyze how the traditionalists perpetuate religious patriarchy, whereas non-traditionalists promote more political and social engagement of women. Based on Group Threat Theory as a conceptual lens, the study employs a qualitative case study methodology. It draws on social media data from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, complemented with newspaper, television, journal articles, and protest archives. Data were collected through thematic content analysis of social media, visual media, and grassroots activism, using search terms such as "Aurat March" and "anti-feminism Pakistan." The findings indicate an intense intergroup tension: women's rights organizations, civil society, and feminist foreign policy-supporting media voices, all non-traditionalists, believe women's liberty is under an existential threat due to entrenched religious patriarchy. They counter by demanding women's empowerment on such matters as body rights, marriage, dowry, and public participation. Alternatively, traditionalists view these demands as a cultural and symbolic threat to male authority, Islamic values, and morality. This results in militant counter-discourses, institutionalized resistance at the state level, and efforts to solidify conservative gender norms. The article finds that this intensifying group threat dynamic has grown into a bigger political and cultural conflict, setting gender identity politics in Pakistan but also across similarly structured postcolonial Muslim nations.

Keyword: Feminism, social media: Pakistan; Women's Rights; Aurat March

1. Introduction

The social, economic, religious, and cultural position of women in Pakistan has been a matter of national and international concern for decades. Despite concerns regarding gender-based discrimination and structural injustice that have increasingly dominated academic and popular debates in the last twenty years, the theoretical account of gender and religious

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identifications during colonial and postcolonial Pakistan has been piecemeal and disputed. On the one hand, such contestations have given rise to vibrant feminist movements within the country. On the other hand, international media portrayal of Pakistani women as equally victimized has often been invoked to advance conservative or orientalist narratives both within and outside the country.

Pakistan, since it attained independence in 1947, has embraced Islamic nationalism as an important cornerstone of the country's state ideology. Such an ideological platform has had significant effects on debates around citizenship and gender identity. Women, in general, have come to represent national honor and morality, thus transforming their social roles into issues of fierce political and cultural contestation. State institutions, operating under the influence of this ideology, have served as gatekeepers of women's public presence, regulating how their roles are constructed and who has the authority to define them (Rouse, 2004). This tension has been manifested as a battle between two opposing blocs: Western-aligned feminist voices demanding equal freedoms and rights, and religious-patriarchal narratives attempting to preserve traditional roles in the name of Islamic and cultural values (Kangaspunta et al., 2018).

Every year, on March 8, Pakistani feminists organize the Aurat March (Women's March) for International Women's Day. The march advocates for justice across a wide range of issues. Participants demand justice and support for women who face violence and harassment from men in public spaces, at home, and in the workplace, as well as economic justice, labor rights for women, recognition for women's work in the care economy as earning pay, maternity leave, and daycare centers to promote women's inclusion in public life (Azeem, 2020). Feminist activists highlight alarming data on gender inequality in Pakistan and connect the low number of women in public life to Pakistan's poor ranking worldwide in education and gender equality (Bruck & Baig, 2015). Their main argument is that social and institutional barriers—especially patriarchal systems of governance and lawmaking—continuously undermine women's agency and reinforce their subordination (Chughtai, 2020).

Although Pakistani anti-feminists are not necessarily against women's empowerment and rights, they view that the presence of women in public spaces can cause sexual harassment and violence against women. For instance, they argue that co-education proliferates indecency in Pakistani Muslim society, leading to crimes against women. The reason they give is that boys and girls who study together in the same classrooms would develop friendships or fall in love and foster extramarital relations forbidden in Islamic values and Pakistani culture (Qureshi, 2020). They deem that the implementation of Islamic criminal laws would significantly reduce crimes against women, where the existing British colonial-era justice system (police, courts, and laws) has failed to prevent rapes and murders of women in the name of 'honour.' Anti-feminists also stress a more significant role for women in family raising and care within the ambit of Pakistani culture and values (Safina, 2020).

Despite the effusiveness of this debate, there is a significant research deficit when it comes to understanding how the ideological roots of the Pakistani state continue to shape women's roles through both state apparatus and public spaces. Whereas earlier scholarship has examined feminist movements, legal cases, or religious institutions in isolation, few studies examine the intersection of Islamic ideology, institutional policy, and digital media discourse together as they influence the polarization of women's inclusion in public life. This shortfall is especially realized during the social media era, when feminist and patriarchal arguments are waged in real-time and affect public opinion at a dizzying speed.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to analyze how Islamic nationalism's ideological discourse continues to influence institutional responses and sentiments at the national level toward women's roles in Pakistan. Analyzing feminist and anti-feminist discourses—particularly as propagated on social media and through the arena of academic scholarship—this paper attempts to understand how religious and secular ideologies compete to define women's rightful place in society. In so doing, it also answers to the broader research objectives of deconstructing the ideological battles between religious patriarchy and Western-type feminism, and evaluating their implications for women's citizenship and agency in present-day Pakistan.

2. Religion, Society, And Gender Identity

The contemporary controversy between 'Western' feminism and local traditionalists in non-Western societies, which are manifestations of Western colonialism. The British colonial systems of hegemony (including in present-day Pakistan) are based on racializing the local

population, such as categorizing and marginalizing groups of people according to religion, ethnicity, and gender. These systems formed laws and legal norms that are specifically oppressive to women. Colonial administrators also disrupted existing gender relations and used rape, physical assault, sexual slavery, and sex crime as a tool of white Christian patriarchy and colonialism (Gouws, 2018; Smith, 2005). For example, in Nigeria, men and women were chieftains in pre-colonial Nigeria. Yet, British colonial officials refused to negotiate with female chiefs, instead putting in place a system of land ownership that explicitly excluded women (Sheldon, 2018).

In pre-partition British India (present-day Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India), British colonial authorities polarised religious identity (Hindu versus Muslim) and created a racial hierarchy. This provided the fodder for many armed conflicts in this region, ultimately encouraging men to be aggressive and violent, even within the family (Mannell, 2022). Even though the Indian sub-continent has a long history of powerful women, such as queens, who rose to face colonial conflicts and fought when the need to defend their society arose (Chakrabarti , 2018).

The emotional consequences of the racialization of local populations arising from colonization are essential in understanding contemporary gender relations in postcolonial societies. The representation of the colonial traditional hero as a White Christian man leaves the non-Christian men of colour in these societies with a desire to be someone else. They are thus robbed of their sense of self, agency, and decision-making power (Fanon , 2008). The officials, such as judges, writers, and journalists, in postcolonial government institutions accede to an impulse of white, male fairness, which they genuinely thought to be just and impartial, thereby leaving a question over the truthfulness of this impulse (Anagol & Grey, 2017).

In contemporary Western societies, new emergent diasporic spaces provide the further overlapping identity of women of colour. Skilled immigrant women of colour in a White Anglo-dominant society face racialization of working spaces. Despite being highly skilled immigrant women, they come across prejudice and racism in the hiring process compared to non-White women (Carangio et al., 2021) . These women feel the denial of their voice and space despite having educational credentials, thus having contesting perceptions of gender, education, and cultural diversity, and myriad identities within the public spaces of postcolonial and transnational societies (Belford & Roy, 2018)

In the Western culture, women who participate in public spaces are more likely to experience gender-based abuse and harassment on new media compared to their male counterparts (Guerin & Shah, 2020). Still, Western women feminists have been defying the White male Christian's patriarchal identity through new media like Facebook (N/A, Fight the Patriarchy, 2022; N/A, 2022). American society has recently accepted an equal pay rate to sportswomen with sportsmen at the national level, eliminating a controversial pay gap that saw women players earning less than men (Hernandez, 2022). Muslim women migrants from conflict-affected countries (induced mainly by the Western governments) in the Western societies experience the loss of their language and cultural identity. They must learn the Western language, such as English, to adjust to a new society. As these women invest in language learning to acquire cultural, social, and economic capital, they reconstruct their identities.

The contention arises between identity formation and language learning as these women struggle to seek belonging and acceptance in their new-found society and try not to deconstruct their Muslim identity and culture (Shwayli & Barnes, 2018).In addition to this, we can say that there are four main challenges that Muslim women are facing in the Western Context: (1) Construction of the Other – Muslims are often portrayed as an out-group, with media and societal narratives dehumanizing them, especially post-9/11, linking Islam to terrorism. This creates widespread fear and discrimination. (2) Stigmatization of Appearance and Attire – Muslims, particularly those who are visibly identifiable (e.g., wearing hijabs or having beards), face higher levels of scrutiny and hostility. This stigmatization affects both men and women, though women experience additional gendered dimensions of oppression. (3) Homogeneity of Identity and Experience – Muslims are often homogenized as a monolithic group, with little recognition of their diversity in practices, beliefs, and experiences. This misunderstanding contributes to stereotyping and discriminatory practices. (4) Concealing and Normalizing Behaviour – Many Muslims, in response to Islamophobia, adopt strategies to hide or downplay their religious identity, adjusting their behaviour and appearance to avoid negative attention or violence (Rehman & Hanley, 2022).To assert their agency, the women

employ strategies like reframing stereotypes, challenging oppressive structures, and demonstrating ambivalence to societal expectations. There is labour behind these everyday performances and how they disrupt normative power relations, particularly in a post-9/11 context where Muslim women have been scrutinized through lenses of suspicion and Islamophobia. Despite their visibility in some spheres, these women must constantly negotiate their subjectivity to be seen as legitimate political actors, aiming for cultural transformation while balancing resistance and conformity (Hussein, 2023).

In postcolonial Muslim societies, especially the current Pakistan, male members were on the front in resisting the colonial occupation of Muslim countries, and they desired to acquire some form of agency or essential status. They pursued this position by embracing conspicuous religiousness, particularly by adopting the status a freedom fighter (*mujahid*), whereby a woman's position was being a mother, sister, or wife of a martyr — a loss to the power and privilege of a woman's identity (Rashid, 2023). Pakistan's independent struggle from British India in the 1940s, Muslim women's real identity was shaped as mothers and wives who would nurture, support, socialize, and sacrifice for the good of the Muslim nation. They are biological and ideological reproducers of the nation, whose primary value is to be wives and mothers who give birth to citizens and socialize youth into Islamic culture (Cook, 2001). In the above context of the national identity of Pakistan, the state's Islamic nationalism dissuades women from participating in the Western-oriented gender rights movements because traditionalists respond to such movements through Islamic activism (Jafri, 2021).

Although religion offers barriers to women's rights and gender equality as per the notion of religious liberty, cultural preservation becomes more prominent in gender identity construction (man and woman) than religion (Gunn, 2020). In Indian society, preference for a son leads to the infanticide of a female child, and the custom of dowry suppresses a woman's identity while construing a man's superiority (Kaur & Kapoor, 2021). Similarly, in Pakistan, patriarchy works to curtail women's freedom and rights through coercive methods against women (e.g., honour killing, forced marriage), which can be cultural practices to the suppression of women's identity in social and political space. Their identity is perceived as inferior to men and women at home and in the workplace. Their families and relatives systemically marginalize them based on their identity (Jatoi, 2015).

The state-sponsored Islamization in Pakistan during the 1980s introduced some of the most repressive criminal laws towards women. These include the Hudood Ordinances, a set of laws dealing with rape, adultery, and fornication (Khan & Saeed, 2000). Since that time, the state-mandated resistance to "Western" culture and efforts to revive the believed valid Islamic norms, the key messages of traditionalists, have been promoting the irrelevance of the individual existence of women concerning their citizenship rights (Kassam, 2007). It is sometimes believed that global discourses on women's empowerment often assume that education and mobility lead to linear progress toward gender equality. However, in Pakistan, these tools of empowerment are filtered through cultural expectations of modesty, family honour, and religious norms. While these women can achieve some degree of agency, their participation in sustainability efforts remains restricted due to cultural curbs on their mobility and decision-making, especially regarding sexuality. The authors stress the need for education and mobility to be contextualized within local religious-cultural norms while advocating for reinterpretation of these norms to foster more significant gender equity (Yasmin & Safdar , 2023).

In other Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, traditionalists promote gender inequality through the conscious selection of certain Qur'anic verses and hadiths in ways that could reproduce existing inequalities between men and women. The religious interpretation process becomes prejudiced by the religio-patriarchal social structures of the current Indonesian society (Aziz et al., 2020). Similarly, Malaysian politics of gender, citizenship, and religion are intertwined deeply over the body of a Malay woman. Malaysian law dealing with apostasy has been believed unjust to women (both Muslims and non-Muslims) in which the body of the Malay woman has been in a position of contestation where patriarchal and religious traditions have taken precedence in law over notions of individual rights (Hussin, 2016). In the same vein, Pakistani religious patriarchy manipulates Islamic sacred texts to construct a comforting space for women, which has led to the politics of religious interpretation and the informal influence of traditionalists. The inner conflict coerces women's identity into interrupting social and religious limitations in a Muslim society (Azam & Hong, 2021). The paper aims to analyze the social and political debate over women's identity,

patriarchy, and Islamic identity in Pakistani society, mainly on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube).

3. Theorising women's online activism in Pakistan

Group threat theory is the theoretical lens to analyze traditional and non-traditional perceived threats. According to this theory, negative attitudes towards members of an outgroup arise from the perception of four threat types about that outgroup: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. This paper employs two concepts of the group threat theory: realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats concern a group's power and resources, whereas symbolic threats concern a group's values, culture, language, and worldview (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) . In this regard, men's perception that their ingroup is losing value across several social spheres is associated with social status and realistic threat, both associated with opposition to feminist movements. Information about the declining value of masculinity activates status threat, which motivates less support for feminist movements. Among men who highly identified as masculine, this same information reduced support for feminist movements through symbolic threat. Thus, the perceived decline in the social value of traditional masculinity creates status anxiety about the ingroup's future and motivates compensatory reactions against gender equality (Rodriguez et al., 2022). This paper discusses Pakistani traditionalists' realistic threat and social status in the form of losing power and resources in society. At the same time, non-traditionalists are afraid of symbolic and realistic threats to women's identity, position, and space in Pakistani society. The paper examines how men's perception of the declining value of traditional masculinity activates social status and realistic threat in traditionalists and how non-traditionalists, in turn, support feminist social movements in Pakistani society

4. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding in depth the implementation of the Meutaloe Wareeh agricultural empowerment model in organic rice farmer groups in North Aceh. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore local perspectives, experiences, and knowledge that underlie Meutaloe Wareeh-based organic farming practices (Moleong 2017, 2019). The research utilises a qualitative case study methodology to examine the ideological contestation of non-traditionalist and traditionalist actors in Pakistan over women's roles in public life. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of specific events, stories, and public reactions to the Aurat March every year and counter-narratives that unfold against it. A case study works well in this research since it allows for in-depth analysis of complex social processes unfolding across online as well as offline domains.

4.1. Data Collection Techniques

The primary data for this research were collected through a combination of offline and online sources. Social media was the primary site of data collection due to its growing importance as a platform of political activism and dissemination of discourse in Pakistan. Three leading platforms—Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—were selected on the grounds of their popularity, accessibility, and relevance to public discussion in the Pakistani context. These platforms were utilized because they provide different content types (text, images, video) and facilitate public engagement through comments, shares, likes, and retweets.

For collecting data, particular keywords were utilized, like "Aurat March" and "anti-feminism Pakistan", which provided useful content from feminist and anti-feminist platforms. Through Twitter, public timelines making frequent use of these words were identified and their tweets were copied through screenshots. Similarly, Facebook pages and groups associated with either feminist protests or their opponents were accessed using the same terms. Posts, photos, about pages, and user interactions were captured in screen shots and sequentially numbered for analysis. YouTube videos of speeches, protest marches, panel discussions related to the Aurat March and controversies surrounding it were watched and indexed.

Other than cyberspace data, corroborating offline sources were employed, like newspaper reports, television debates, journal releases, and reports of human rights organizations. These sources were employed in an effort to place the online debate and legitimize its relevance to the offline world. Offline videos of protest, interview feedback from participants, and event

coverage provided further understanding of how traditionalist and feminist stories end up being implemented in tangible public spaces.

4.2. Data Analysis Techniques

The information collected was analyzed using qualitative content analysis and visual discourse analysis. Messages, counter-messages, and visual symbols contained within the screenshots were coded and grouped thematically in line with recurring ideas, narratives, and emotive tones. Ideological framing used by traditionalists (e.g., religious, cultural, or moralistic) and non-traditionalists (e.g., human rights, gender equality, or constitutional rights) received attention. The photos and posts not only were content-analyzed, but also their engagement metrics—retweets, group membership, comments, and likes—and these were visually highlighted in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 by circling them in blue. They serve as indicators of the reach and resonance of each story.

One of the main analytical frameworks utilized in this study is Group Threat Theory, which explains how perceived threats—realistic (e.g., erosion of cultural values) and symbolic (e.g., erosion of Islamic identity)—is responsible for intergroup conflict. The theory provides a useful framework to understand how feminist and anti-feminist groups perceive the other's activism as a threat to their social identity or normative order. This article applies Group Threat Theory in a novel way to explain gendered ideological polarization in the Pakistani setting, especially in Islamic nations where religious and cultural identities are powerfully entangled.

The combination of visual data, social media data, and theoretical thinking allows for a three-dimensional understanding of the contemporary gender debate in Pakistan. Utilizing the combination of digital ethnography and thematic analysis, the research provides a comprehensive assessment of how opinions are shaped, contested, and framed both online and offline.

5. Result and Discussion

The discourse of Pakistani feminists on social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, illustrates how Group Threat Theory manifests in the country's polarized gender politics (see Figure 1). Group Threat Theory posits that perceived threats to a dominant group's status—be they symbolic or material—often trigger defensive reactions, stereotyping, and attempts to reinforce in-group boundaries. This threat of traditionalists comes from different counter-cultural concepts of non-traditionalists, for example, *mera jism meri marzi* ["my body my choice"], *haq-mehar, "*there is no honour in killing"*,* and *jahaiz khouri band karo* ["stop the custom dowry"] (Rehman, 2020). These counter-cultural concepts of non-traditional feminist activists, aiming to create more significant space for women in Pakistani society, would generate fear in the men-dominated system of the country by representing women as the victims of forced marriages, honour killings, inequality in property rights in cases of divorce, and the practice of dowry. This negative stereotyping of the "other" group members, in this case, the traditionalists, as a single group, is associated with releasing adverse emotional reactions (Croucher, 2017). The greater the negative stereotyping, the greater the emotional response from "other" group members, like traditionalists.

Figure 1. Aurat or Women March Across Different Cities in Pakistan

Source: Twitter accounts of non-traditionalists

There is also a debate among non-traditionalists on the concept of women's empowerment in Muslim societies, that the presence of women going to work in the public work industry is a visual marker of changes in gender norms. This helps widen women's sense of economic agency and the international perception that Muslim women have been empowered through mass employment in global value markets. But this identity of women's empowerment is merely an individual paycheck as the empowerment depends on women's abilities to organize and build independent work organizations (Nazneen, 2019).

Figure 2. Feminism in Pakistan and **Figure 3.** Counter Feminism in Pakistan.

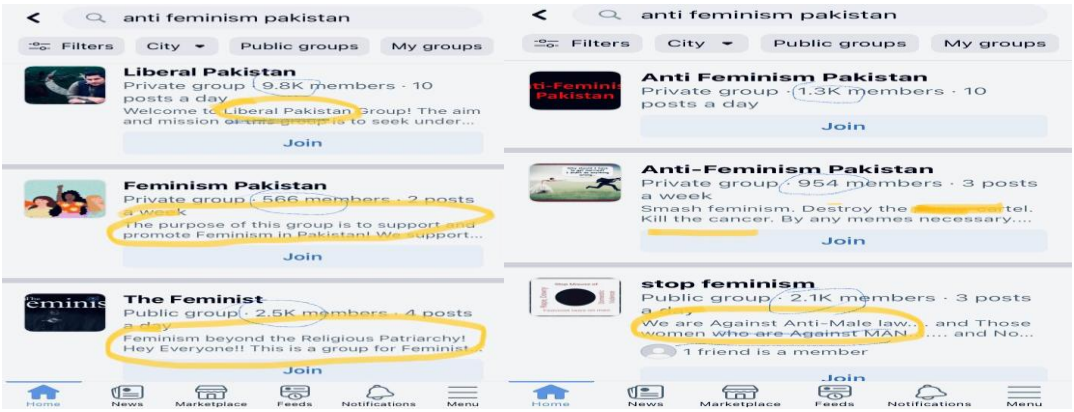

Figure 2 Figure 3

Source: Facebook Pages of Non-Traditionalists

In reaction, traditionalists engage state power and attempt to institutionalize traditional gender identity using religious notions, such as terming the above concepts of the Aurat March in Pakistan equal to 'blasphemy' and 'anti-Islamic agenda' pushed by the West on a Muslim society (see Figures 2 and 3). This reflects the state's policy, which sees the construction of women's identities working in public space as a destabilization factor for traditional gendered roles in a Muslim society. During the presidential election campaign in the 1960s, the traditionalists challenged the candidacy of the country's President, Miss Fatima Jinnah, and helped declare it un-Islamic through a fatwa (Weiss, 1994). During the 1980s, the candidacy of Benazir Bhutto for Prime Ministership of Pakistan, a fatwa was issued stating that the 'emir or the head of the state (i.e., president) 'must be a man' (Weiss, 1994, p. P 439). The women's non-domestic workspace is viewed as a danger to the national identity, by which their contribution to national development becomes non-existent (Grünenfelder, 2013). This aligns with the Group Threat framework, which emphasizes how dominant groups leverage structural power to suppress challenges to their authority. The traditionalists indirectly help the political interest of the ruling class of the Muslim elite, who do not want the freedom of the common Muslims from their medieval psyche, as the status quo suits their socio-economic and political agenda (Upadhyay, 2002).

Figure 4. Criticism to the Religious Patriarchy in Justice System of Pakistan.

Figure 5. The State Sponsored Full Veil for Schoolgirls in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan.

Sources: A Twitter Post of Aurat Azadi March Islamabad (figure 4), Twitter post (figure 5)

The activism of traditionalists focuses on holding *haya* or "morality" marches, perceiving feminist activism as a threat to the values of a traditional Muslim society. As they believe feminists are propagating immorality in Islamic countries, they choose to 'smash the feminism' as this is believed to be a 'cancer' for traditional Pakistani society. Their counter-discourses revolve around the concepts of main ba-parda hun or "I am in the veil," main ghar ki malka hun, or "I am the queen of the home," behave *na manzoor* or, "we reject the immorality" (see Figures 3 and 4), which confirms the central premise of Group Threat Theory. The traditionalists argue that the presence of women in public spaces (e.g., universities, offices) is against the social values of Pakistan because it is a majority Muslim country. Traditionalists view non-traditionalist activism not only as Western-inspired but as a fundamental disruption to the Islamic gender order they seek to maintain. This symbolic threat intensifies intergroup anxiety, fuelling the polarization of gender roles and women's identity in Pakistani society. Islamic laws should guide state institutions on an ideological basis, and these laws should be part of policies and public discourse in the country (see Figure 6). Islamic laws should be implemented in all aspects of life. To achieve this political goal, traditionalists employ state laws against feminists and try to push the law officials to see that the activism of women should be seen as anti-state and societal values of Pakistan (see Figure 5).

Figure 6. Condemning the Forced Conversion and Sexual Violence Against Girls of Pakistani Religious Minorities

Source: Minorities in Pakistan Twitter/X Post

In practice, religion plays a leading role in performing only rituals at birth, death, and during the marriage ceremony. In contrast, in matters such as inheritance, divorce, maintenance, and the role and status of women in society, patriarchal values dominate. Religious leaders and preachers cannot define gender relations other than their customary roles, including women's education, employment as well as state/citizen relationship (Alexiev, 2005). This religious patriarchy put Pakistani women in between the Western frameworks of intellectual thought and reasoning as well as in the context of their own potentially different social lives and self-identities as Muslim women. These women, in addition to negotiating with the Western notions of feminism, also simultaneously challenge the Indigenous patriarchal hegemonies and conservative religious discourses in their social context by attempting to rework notions of Muslim women's identity in Pakistan (Zubair & Zubair, 2017).

Whereas non-traditionalists feel threatened by the influence of traditionalists on the state level in police, courts, media, politics, and education and feel this influence cultivates a traditional mindset towards women in future generations of Pakistan (see Figure 6). Eventually, laws and policies towards women are strict and suggest severe punishment along men-dominated police, laws, and legal courts, which represent a bias towards women in whole society (Rehman 2020). In cases of harassment of women by men in the workplace, these women would be afraid of society and the criminal justice system for blaming them

instead of the harasser, which could further discriminate against them by restricting their movement in public spaces for education and jobs (Ahmed, 2019). In media, female characters are portrayed positively when submissive to their husbands and conform to societal norms. They were appreciated for obeying their parents and expected to compromise. On the contrary, the females who did not follow these norms are shown as negative characters. However, a newer identity of neutral depiction of working women in the dramas is presented. These women are shown as independent and, at the same time, respectful of cultural norms. These roles reflect the state-induced practice of gender relations in Pakistani society. The non-traditionalists believe that male perpetrators of crime against women find easy ways to evade justice and law. That is why the conviction rate in cases of violence against women is shallow in Pakistani courts (Schaflechner, 2017). They concern that such weakness of the justice system and political discourse facilitates male perpetrators to commit violence against marginalized groups – especially children, women of religious minorities, and transgenders with impunity (Saigol, 1996). In the context of the Islamic collective identity of Pakistan, non-traditionalist activists from Pakistani religious minorities claim that young girls of Pakistani Hindus and Christians are abducted and forcefully converted by Sunni Muslims (followed by forced marriages of those girls). Whereas the perpetrators, courts, police, and media represent that the victim converted to Sunni Islam according to her own will because she was in love with the perpetrator (Minorities in Pakistan 2020: see Figure 7).

Pakistani women also create debate on YouTube that parallel activism of non-traditionalists and traditionalists polarises the women's identity in the country. However, both aim to seek women's rights and equality. Instead of women empowerment, this polarization creates an identity crisis among Pakistani women (N/A, 2022). One of the members of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) asserted that CII 'strongly supports the women's education and rights', but they feel intimidated by the Wester-oriented messages of non-traditionalists such as, *aurat bacha paida krny ki machine nai ha* or, "woman is not a machine to produce a child" and *dupatta tumey itna pasand ha to khud hi oorh loo or, if you are too much fond of scarf, wear it yourself* (Naz, 2022).

Universal human rights organizations are mostly perceived to be a product of Western culture, which threatens to undermine non-Western values about gender identity formation (Gunn, 2020). In the aftermath of any crisis (e.g., earthquake, floods) that struck Pakistan, an unprecedented number of Western aid actors arrived. Group Threat Theory also provides insight into the gendered aftermath of crises. The influx of international humanitarian aid following natural disasters often expands women's participation in public labor markets. While some local men see this as a progressive shift, others perceive it as a threat to traditional masculinity and gender roles. Their reactions vary: some attempt to curtail this change, while others support it conditionally. These mixed responses reflect a "masculinity crisis" in which men also feel challenged by changing gender norms but are unsure whether to resist or adapt—again confirming the theory's emphasis on intergroup anxiety (Loureiro, 2019).

In recent years, the West has introduced a feminist foreign policy as a political tool in which it pours development aid targeting and incentivizing programs that prioritize gender equality, gender parity, and women's rights through activism and advocacy (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2019). Consequently, intergroup anxiety gives rise to political contention, and both groups [traditionalists and non-traditionalists] in Pakistan and beyond feel threatened by the increasing appearance of women's rights movements in public spaces with members of the "other" group. This contention even sometimes leads to a violent confrontation between feminist activists and traditionalists in Pakistan.

This critique substantiates Group Threat Theory in that it shows how perceived threats—structural and symbolic—enflame conflict among non-traditionalists and traditionalists in Pakistan. Feminist slogans and demands are symbolic challenges to the patriarchal order, and traditionalists react by defending their values with moral, religious, and institutional tools. Accordingly, feminists regard this backlash as oppressively state-sustained in its aim to perpetuate inequality and injustice. The dynamic is polarizing and recursive: each polarizes and responds to the other with increased emotional passion, stereotyping, and identity reaffirmation. The ideological struggle is thus not only a religious or political argument but a struggle of identity and power, facilitated by social media, institutional behavior, and public discourse. Group Threat Theory provides a robust lens through which to interpret this phenomenon, especially in a postcolonial Muslim state grappling with modernity, tradition, and globalisation.

6. Conclusion

By revisiting the discussion above and employing the group threat theory, this paper draws on this theory in the context of Islamic society, in this case, Pakistan. The paper suggests that women's identity construction and their position in public space (employment, politics, media) in Pakistan implies a social status and power threat to the religious patriarchy because the reconstruction of women's identity as equal to men in public space is felt a peril to political status quo (men as rulers) among Pakistani traditionalists. This threat is linked with the negative stereotyping of the identity of those women, such as "betrayal" and "anti-Islam" on social media, who are part of feminist activism. This contention in Pakistan is mainly supported and pushed by the Western countries on a political basis because the West looks at feminists in Pakistan as their allies and promoters of women's rights, which could have a political goal through increasing their cultural influence in a Muslim country. This push further leads to intergroup anxiety and tension in Pakistan in the context of nationalism and gender identity formation. The intergroup threat in a Muslim majority society, like Pakistan, generates prejudice in members of a non-traditionalist group towards the members of a traditionalist group (e.g., religious people), which arises from the perception of a 'realistic threat' that a traditionalist group perceives to its power and control over resources as well as 'symbolic threat' is that which a group perceives to its Muslim values, culture, language, and worldview. This group threat gives rise to intergroup concern between traditionalists and non-traditionalists (the Western-supported feminists) and the local (religious and political) elite who do not want to lose power, privilege, and control in Pakistani society

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