

Direct role of feminist movements in economic empowerment of women in Pakistan

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Introduction

Feminist movements have proved that they are capable of shaping the social, political, and economic realms of many countries, and Pakistan is one such example. In Pakistan, a country with its multifaceted socio-cultural fabric and Islamic tradition, which sometimes puts the contemporary geopolitical developments in contrast with each other, the feminist movements have been battling for women's economic, legal, and social rights by and in terms of challenging the stereotypes of gender roles. The movements for gender equality have contributed to substantial legal changes and shifting public attitudes and are also responsible for the current economic opportunities for women. This article emphasizes the role of feminist movements towards the economic inclusion of women in Pakistan, which despite remarkable progress, still holds various challenges. Pakistan has a patriarchal society where gender norms have been continuously embedded through the years, and women overall have been mostly engaged in family work at home. In contrast to the former half of the 20th century, where unorganized longing was the only option for women, the latter half of it brought organized feminist movements in the fight against existing norms. Furthermore, the Women Action Forum (WAF) that started in the early 1980s, remained a leading movement in uniting women and fighting for their rights (Shaheed, 1986). This significantly facilitated the professional and career-wise advancement of females in Pakistan. This research investigates the historical stages of the feminist movement in the local context, starting from the postcolonial era and ending with the contemporary period, and uncovers the latter's influence on the economic empowerment of women throughout the different epochs. As a result, these movements have not only impacted public policy and law but also have invested heavily in changing cultural perceptions and orientations of women towards economic empowerment.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Trace the chronological development of feminist movements in Pakistan since colonial times and discuss how each of these has been in sync with their socio-political context.

2. Analyze how these movements affected the economic freedom of women in light of newly adopted laws and the social transformations they triggered.
3. Determine the challenges and barriers these movements have had to face along with how they have been tackling them to bring about substantial change.

Economic gender equality does not only provide basic human rights but also should be regarded as a necessary factor contributing to general social development. Empowering women economically through this process can result in overall sustainable development. A lower rate of poverty, better outcomes in family health and education as well as other aspects are possible. In Pakistan, a country where gender inequalities are prevalent, feminist movements, specifically the role they have played in empowering women economically, is critical, and hence the entire narrative of growth and social change can be drawn from that. We would like to come up with something that is going to contribute to the ongoing discussion about gender equality and economic development. Such a contribution may be helpful for policymakers, scholars, and activists as they will gain a better understanding of the causal factors and dynamics that guide this process. Along with that, the importance of the research will be uncovered and the effectual methods will be also found out which could be used to help the struggle for women's economic rights in Pakistan and the rest of the world as well. By examining the perspectives of feminist movements and the changes in the socioeconomic status of women in Pakistan, using extensive articles and case studies, this paper aims to reveal their impact on the overall progress in society.

Literature Review

Context and Background

Pakistan, the world's fifth most populous country, is home to a vast spider web of economic, demographic, and social systems that weave together how women are portrayed in various sectors. With the erosion of anti-women policies in Pakistan, women have become victims of a variety of impediments, including economic prospects, health, and education. The situation is further compounded by ubiquitous societal ideals that elevate men in all arenas, both public and private (Hales, 2005). In economic terms, indeed, Pakistani women engage less as compared to men due to various causes such as household responsibilities, social norms, and

gender prejudices. The World Bank data (2021) reports that the female labor force participation rate in Pakistan has just been 22% which is much lower than the global average. This low participation is caused by several reasons such as insufficient education opportunities, cultural barriers, and limited support services for women workers. Education, the main factor in women's economic empowerment, is still out of reach by a large number of Pakistani women. The literacy rate for women in the country is around 47% while that for men it is 71% as per the official statistics (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Inequalities in education are caused by socioeconomic limitations, very early marriages, and the cultural traditions that give priority to male education. However, feminist movements also made progress and contributed to women's empowerment and enlightenment to some extent. The law reforms from 2006 to 2010, like the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act and the appointment of the National Commission on Status of Women, provided structures and frameworks that helped the course of gender equality (Cheema et al., 2008).

This introduction is a prelude to a deep analysis of how feminist movements in Pakistan are the influencing factor behind the socio-economic indicators for women, which will also consider both the successes and the challenges that these movements are facing. In a growing state like Pakistan, in contrast to other nations, feminist movements for gender equality play a key position and combat a system of inequalities that bound women in nearly all areas of human existence. These movements aren't pretty much advocating for the same rights as international ones, but are deeply concerned with addressing the root causes of discrimination that affect women's financial, social, and political lives. Feminist movements in Pakistan have historically been at the forefront of pushing for societal modifications that extend beyond mere criminal reforms. Their target is a restructuring of our society through the process of influencing old norms and assumptions about women's contributions in the community and economy, which have been mostly overlooked and undermined. Last yet not least, these women's rights movements have been very central in lobbying for the passage of more legislation and policies that have immensely helped in the disruption of gender inequalities and prevention of women's discrimination and abuse. Given that the role of women's economic contributions in the changing financial background of Pakistan is now taken as an important factor for sustainable development, the significance of these movements has become a paramount issue now in the global context. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) strives to foster economic growth and fight poverty by recognizing the paramount of gender equality. It believes that

empowering women at both family and national levels is now not only conceptually good but also practically gainful (UNDP, 2021).

Historical Overview of Feminist Movements in Pakistan

Early Activism (1947-1977)

With the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, women's freedom and empowerment began to blossom, driven by the pioneering women's organizations and campaigners. The wartime experience of those early years provided the breeding ground for later feminist activism which is a manifestation of the period of transformations and mobilization of women's rights within the newly formed independent nation.

At the beginning and the most important of the epoch was the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) which was established in 1949 as a first. The role APWA developed was more than just a spearhead for women's rights and their social and judicial status, this role became crucial. The women leadership cut by persons like Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan was the major element that pushed for reforms through the legislative system in support of women in Pakistan. These efforts have led to the enactment of several landmark pieces of legislation, where among these particular ones is the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance that was enacted in 1961 and aimed at ensuring equity for women in marriage, divorce, and inheritance (Shaheed, 2023). However, the social achievements of APWA were not only democratic; they also attended to women's education, health, and social rights, a model of future feminist activism in Pakistan.

In addition to this, feminism can be considered one of the most important factors that affected women's engagement in politics during early post-independence Pakistan as well. Fatima Jinnah, the sister of the nation's leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, also played a prominent role. The election campaign in 1965 led by her against the military dictator Ayub Khan was a milestone in the political history of Pakistan, helping to challenge patriarchal and military dominance. The political career of Fatima Jinnah and her role altered the whole perception of women about becoming part of political decision-making, which was deemed the preserve of

the men of the time. Although her campaign was unsuccessful, she nevertheless challenged the tradition and paved the way for a generation of women to become involved in political activism (McLaren, 2023). The importance of women's involvement in the national discourse has thus been highlighted

In Pakistan, the years 1947–1977 were marked by a dual emphasis on expanding women's socio-political mobilization and legislative reforms. Prominent individuals like Fatima Jinnah and groups like APWA spearheaded these initiatives, pushing for a society that is more equal and inclusive. Their efforts not only helped women achieve early legal and social victories, but they also laid a solid basis for later feminist movements. The early feminist campaigns had a vital role in laying the groundwork for later feminist movements, which aimed to broaden the scope of women's rights in Pakistan and face the obstacles provided by political Islamization.

Islamization and Its Impact on Women's Rights (1977-1988)

The Regime of Zia-ul-Haq and Feminist Response

The 1970s and the 80s in Pakistan, especially the term of General Zia-ul-Haq, was the most dramatic period in history, as severe laws and norms were the Iran of women's rights and legal status. The time between General Zia's assumption of power in 1977 and his death in 1988 was when there was a range of legal reforms and policies that were brought to light under the claim of islamizing society, and in this process, the position of women in society was noticeably weakened. The introduction of the Hudood Ordinance in 1979, was one of the most contentious as well as the most influential laws that took place during this era. Several laws prevail to this day, among which are Zina (adultery and fornication), non-marital rape, and different forms of theft and robbery laws which combined local Islamic jurisprudence with Pakistan's legal system in the most chaotic way and which resulted in the most harm to women. The Hudood Ordinance downgraded the role of women in the legal evidence. In the rape cases, women's burden of proving themselves innocent was more than compared to that of men. This often led to girls being victimized by the judicial process itself (Shaheed, 2023). The Islamization period of Zia-ul-Haq brought about the revival of the feminist movement in Pakistan, with the Women Action Forum on the top of the tide in this development. Women's organization's contribution during this time was vital in raising awareness about the destructive results of Islamization on

women's rights. This also played a major role in the mobilization of both national and international support to combat this policy.

Legal Frameworks and Institutionalized Gender Discrimination

The laws launched during the Islamization period had institutionalized gender discrimination to a great extent in the Pakistani circle. Not only did the Hudood Ordinances and subsequent legislation eliminate women from the legal system but they also nourished the patriarchal belief of women being lower compared to men. Such legislation resulted in the aggravation of the problem of people not getting justice in cases of sexual violence and it helped the formation of a general impunity for them.

Feminists addressed these issues in a variety of ways. In parallel with the World Association of Women Lawyers, they carried out real investigations to highlight the disasters caused by these laws and aimed at providing legal reform solutions apart from the activity of WAF. Even though the country's political environment is very tough, the pioneering initiatives in this regard demonstrated the power of the women's legal movement, which is resilient to institutionalized misogyny and gender bias (Shaheed, 2023; McLaren, 2023).

Islamization of the country brought about the great feminist era that was the reaction to some of the gender inequalities under Zia-ul-Haq's regime. The movement profoundly affected the position and rights of Pakistani women and still has a significant influence on national discussions on women's rights. The establishment of WAF and the legal obstacles of the Hudood Ordinance and gender discrimination laws demonstrated the increasingly important tie between law, religion, and gender in Pakistan which showed that gender injustice is still a big challenge in this country.

Key Figures and Organizations

The most influential individuals and organizations of Pakistan's feminist movements include the Women's Action Forum (WAF) and its founders. Asma Jahangir is one of the most prominent figures in this period. Jahangir was a staunch proponent of human rights and eventually had a great impact on women's rights in Pakistan. Both Jahangir and Hina Jilani, the co-founders of WAF, have been instrumental, particularly in the arena of legal reforms and the

first Pakistani all-women law firm, which was created to provide women with legal aid (Sherman, 1993). For instance, organizations like Shirkat Gah, and Aurat Foundation, have indeed taken on very important tasks. Shirkat Gah is a non-governmental organization established in the 70s that has been very active in women's health and education issues. On the other hand, the Aurat Foundation started in 1986 and has especially concentrated on women's empowerment which could be achieved via legislative changes and political participation (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). These historical insights give a distinct fundamental view of the formal years and the key players in the feminist movements of this country. This review, in particular, is a prelude to a full discussion of ways in which these movements have impacted the socio-political life and the state of affairs, particularly concerning the emancipation of women.

The multi-faceted journey of Pakistan's feminist movement has greatly been emphasized by some remarkable steps that have driven changes and steered the course of women's rights activism. These milestones tell of the struggles and passion of the fighters for gender equity in a situation that is socio-politically challenging.

1. **Formation of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in 1981:** The emergence of WAF in the mid-1980s happened in response to Zia Aul Haq's policies of Islamization that ushered in the infamous Hudood Ordinances. WAF was instrumental in harnessing public sentiment and the involvement of civil society in the fight against the enactment of laws that subjected women to discrimination. Their efforts were prolific in occupying a critical seat at the table to discuss women's rights problems in Pakistan (Toor, 2009).
2. **Passage of the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance (1990):** These by-laws, which eliminated various sections of the Hudood Laws, were a crucial milestone among legal reforms that promoted the rights and roles of women in society, especially regarding violence. This reaction was not unanimous as there were many critics of the change but on the other hand, this was partly driven by persistent feminist activism on legal fronts and therefore showcased the importance of sustained legal activism (Khan & Bari, 2016).
3. **The Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006:** This jurisprudence, in addition to the Hudood Ordinances amendment, comprised another legal victory. It was the result of a multidecade fight, cementing the feminist movement as a powerful force that succeeded in driving government machinery. Women who were

accused of adultery and committed crimes of honor could exercise the right to better civil law rather than under Sharia law (Jahangir & Jilani, 1990).

4. **Aurat March starting in 2018:** The Aurat march has become an annual event that seems to happen on International Women's Day every year and usually calls for various women's rights issues, ranging from economic rights, anti-harassment laws, and anti-violence measures. Such movements, thus, offer a rejuvenated sense of the feminist cause in the modern digital age and allow for an inter-generational fight for equality standing side by side together (Ali, 2019).
5. **The Anti-Sexual Harassment Laws, 2010:** This move was the catalyst for feminist organizations to introduce laws that protected working women and also brought a significant shift toward safer environments. They were responsible for laying the groundwork for addressing gender-based harassment claims at work thus showing that the legal political advocacy of feminism cannot only be considered a framework of ideas but also a practical tool that ensures the rights and security of women at work (Khan, 2012).

These milestones are not only markers of achievements of the feminist movements but also reminders of the struggle for women's equality that is still on foot in Pakistan. Each case tells us about both progress and the constant endeavors of women to get what they deserve amid the socio-political environment dominated by resistance to change.

Legal Frameworks Supporting Gender Equality

Specific Laws and Their Provisions

The Constitution of Pakistan, as the supreme law of the country, provides foundational paperwork for the safeguarding and development of women's rights. Women's rights are guarded by constitutional provisions that are aimed at tackling gender disparities and protecting them from discrimination, a devotion of Pakistan to gender equality as per international human rights charters.

1. **Article 25 of the Constitution:** This Article adopts the doctrine of equal protection of all people before the law and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex as the sole

criterion. It is also a manifestation of the State's responsibility to secure gender equality and has remained an important legal argument for the promotion of women's rights in Pakistan (Cheema et al., 2008).

2. **Article 34 of the Constitution:** The stated Article addresses, entirely, women's participation in all spheres of national life. It compels the state to embrace measures that will enable women to participate in all fields and find their representation in governmental positions. This provision has been a turning point for advocating gender quotas in jobs of the public sector and political representation (Ali, 2005).
3. **Article 35 of the Constitution:** It underscores the fact that the state, most specifically its responsible parties, have to play the core role in the protection of the institution of marriage, the family, motherhood, and childbirth. Overall, its application has supported as well as expanded these women's rights by way of battles for paternity and maternity leave as well as childcare facilities which will enable women to take part more fully in the workforce (Khan, 2017).

Pakistan has adopted several legislative changes in recent years to boost the economic rights and participation of women. These legislative changes have been crucial in providing women with greater autonomy and opportunities in various economic sectors:

1. The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010):

This act comprehensively sets out the legal framework for women who are harassed at work. The law requires the creation of investigative committees within the companies as well as the people discharged from duties under charges of harassment. Moreover, this law hones the specific anti-harassment policies that companies and organizations must adopt. This legislation was a result of a campaign led by women activists and other groups who were avidly advocating for the well-being and safety of women in the workplace. The movement was driven by growing concerns for the safety of women at work, consequently increasing their economic participation across different industries (Jafar, 2005).

2. Amendments to the Hudood Ordinances (2006):

The amended rules beautifully got rid of some of the unjust measures in the Hudood Ordinances, and special attention has been given to dealing with rape cases. These changes formulated the impossibility of accusing a woman individually of adultery in those cases where she was a victim of rape, and accordingly decreasing the abuse this law entailed upon women.

The amendments were made under the pressure of national and international stakeholders as well as the vigorous efforts of the women's movement led by WAF which amounted to a milestone in women's rights struggles in the country (Shaheed, 1986).

3. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2016 (Honor Killing):

This act aims at specific events usually known as honor killings. It comes with clearer definitions and harsher punishments for those who commit the crimes regardless of whether the victim's family decides to forgive the perpetrators. This was an outstanding milestone in the struggle to protect women from gender-based violence and ensuring that independence in the economic realm would not lead to any trigger of violence (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). This law was a result of wide media coverage of several high-profile cases that triggered public outcry and national as well as international community. The attention given to the cases showed the importance of much stricter legislation.

4. The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011:

The law punishes these cultural and traditional practices that are detrimental to women, such as forced marriages, the Vani system of giving women in marriage to settle disputes, and the denial of women from inheriting properties (Jafar, 2012).

5. The Women in Distress and Detention Fund Act, 2011:

Established to give women who suffer from social or legal problems because of any form of distress, or who are in detention due to such constraints by providing financial and legal aid. It encourages women to grow economically in part by offering them stability in place of the hard times they face in life (Jilani & Rahman, 2013).

6. The Hindu Marriage Act, 2017:

Through this act, Hindu citizens get structured legislation that protects the realms of marriage, family, mother, and child rights in their community. It is a significant step towards the realization of the rights of minority women in Pakistan and, thereby, affects their economic participation by protecting their rights in matters of legal requirements concerning family and partners (Dhawan, 2018).

7. The Benazir Income Support Program (BISP):

The program is a governmental initiative, designed years ago but significantly expanded in recent times, and it aims to increase women's economic inclusion by providing them with unconditional cash transfers. BISP empowers women by making them the primary beneficiaries of the program, which supports millions of low-income women across the country (Malik & Janjua, 2020).

Impact of Feminist Movements on Women's Economic Empowerment

Education and Employment

Through feminist movements in Pakistan, women have had a phenomenal experience in getting better education and employment which are the catalysts for economic empowerment. Through their efforts and lobbying, they have influenced policy changes and social paradigm shifts that have one by one removed the barriers for women in these fields.

Feminist organizations such as the Aurat Foundation and Shirkat Gah have long been at the forefront, advocating for women's right to education. The results of the efforts have enabled increased enrollment rates of girls whether it is at primary or tertiary. The campaign has been particularly effective in calling into question the cultural beliefs that enforce and lay importance to male education and hinder access to education by females (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The education reforms have been very essential in the promotion of women's participation in work. These interventions include domestic skill-learning programs and scholarships, which are aimed especially at women, thus enabling them to practice in areas such as IT, healthcare, and engineering. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutes are well known for their tailored courses for women who want to quickly gain skills that are relevant in the marketplace. That is the main purpose of these programs, which is to be connected to the local industries so the graduates will have the chance of getting a job. Fee deduction, funding, or financial support is also provided to let them study further in male-dominated fields such as science, technology, engineering, or medicine.

Another important result of feminists' efforts is the implementation of the Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2016, which makes education of all children, including girls, free and

compulsory from the age of 5 till their maturity (Khan & Aftab, 2015). This action occurred after women's rights activists struggled for years to bring equality in education.

Entrepreneurship and Economic Participation

Feminist movements in Pakistan have also brought positive changes in terms of women's participation in the economy through women's entrepreneurship. The proposed programs and policy changes they have advocated for have brought more enabling economic systems and practical support that promotes women's economic empowerment, leading to active participation in small and large-scale enterprises as well as the entire economy.

The major role has been played by only a few female-oriented NGOs like the Aurat Foundation and Tehrik-e-Niswan in Pakistan which focus on such skills development programs that help and enhance the entrepreneurial capabilities of women. Educationally, these programs are usually meant to encompass making women competent in crafts and textile production as well as business management. That way, they can employ their skills and expertise to start and run their businesses (Mumtaz & Shahid, 1987). As such, for instance, women may join the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WCCI) in major cities like Lahore and Karachi for networking, market access, and visibility, which have a crucial influence on their engagement in the formal economy (Aslam & Azhar, 2020). To take it a step further, the gender gap in digital literacy is considered an important aspect of the modern economy, and as a result, different initiatives are tailored to increase access to technology. The digital divide is thus addressed by community services sponsored by the government and NGOs. Women are trained to use and have been provided with internet access. They too have created digital training centers that address topics such as basic computer skills, using the Internet for business, and even computer languages at the advanced level and web development. Things like mobile devices that help women search for market information, connect with customers, and save e-commerce platform details are also some of the necessary initiatives.

Entrepreneurship training programs play a major role in developing an innovative mindset in women and also make them independent. Such programs as WECREATE Pakistan are designed to help women participate in businesses by offering them a platform where they can learn business skills, get mentorship, and even receive managerial help and beneficial networks which are essential for start-ups and the sustenance of businesses. Through professional

development and mentor programs, they will be provided with fundamental business skills such as supervision, accountancy, and marketing. Furthermore, women are usually introduced to other female entrepreneurs and potential investors with whom they form business linkages that are critical to the growth and hence the sustainability of the business.

Feminist advocacy is equally important in supporting the development of microfinance institutions in Pakistan, which are considered among the most crucial institutions in providing the capital required for females who want to start their businesses (Malik & Zaman, 2018). Founded in 1996, the Kashf Foundation was one of Pakistan's first microfinance institutions targeted specifically at women. Inspired by the feminist ideology of women's economic independence, Kashf has focused on poverty alleviation through entrepreneurship. It provides microloans to women to start or expand small businesses. Besides financial services, it offers training in financial literacy, business management, and gender rights awareness. The foundation has empowered over 500,000 women, helping them become entrepreneurs and sustain their families. Successful cases of microfinance reveal a significant increase in the households' income and recognition of the borrowers in society. Kashf has become an international example of female economic empowerment through microfinance (Saleem, 2019).

Founded in 2009, the Home-Based Women Workers Federation (HBWWF) is a women-led organization that champions inclusion, recognition, and equal opportunity for home-based workers in Pakistan, which is largely a women-driven sector. Through the HBWWF, they have been successful in campaigning for labor rights, social security, and the recognition of home-based workers who are employed at the home level. This group was successful in steering the bill through the Sindh Assembly and the enactment of the Sindh Home-Based Workers Act in 2018, which recognizes home-based workers legally and mandates equal wages and other benefits (Naz, 2020). The act has been a boon to approximately 12 million home-based workers of Sindh whose rights have been safeguarded and who have been provided a common framework for economic uplift. The HBWWF continues to work on implementing the law across other provinces.

Limitations

Despite these achievements, the feminist movements in Pakistan face several challenges and limitations. The impact of feminist movements has been very disproportionate, with the majority of their achievements being limited to cities. In rural areas, people have more faith in their traditional norms and, therefore, undergo less change (Khan, 2018). This tends to be the case when the requirements and problems of women from religious and ethnic minorities are often not properly envisioned, and this results in the emergence of the gaps that exist in the effectiveness of the feminists in representing women from all segments of the society (Ali, 2020). The feminist efforts to transform the negative attitudes of society towards this cause are still facing extreme levels of hardship as the patriarchal norms are embedded like a disease that is deeply rooted in various parts of Pakistani society (Khan & Nazir, 2017). The same idea about resistance can also be seen from the side of conservative and traditionalist parts of society who stand against the laws and policy implementation that would promote gender equality (Malik & Khan, 2018).

To conclude, there needs to be continued and increased support for legal reforms to strengthen the laws protecting women's rights and to ensure their enforcement. Essentially, legal reforms should continuously be given the backing they need and more endowments to ensure their enforcement. Along with this, policymakers should focus more on inclusive and comprehensive approaches that bring change in women's lives across Pakistan, irrespective of whether they are from urban, rural, or underrepresented communities, to see that no woman is left behind. It is necessary to constantly carry the campaigns of educating people, both male and female, to change the ways people perceive and support gender equality. Leaders as well as common men need to actively take part in feminist initiatives. Their participation will increase the level of society-wide acceptance of women's economic rights. Expanding networks to include more grassroots movements and incorporating diverse female voices can strengthen the feminist agenda and its implementation across Pakistan.

Through the lens of this review, it becomes clear how enriching feminist movements in Pakistan can be, and by giving them space to grow, there will be further progress and advancements in areas where action is still necessary.

Findings and Analysis

Feminist advocacy has tirelessly engaged in pushing and pressing for reforms within the legal framework of Pakistan. This section will outline and analyze the legislative processes involved, along with making an assessment of the direct impacts of such particular laws on women's economic activities and rights.

The Process Through Which These Laws Were Influenced and Enacted

The enactment of these laws involved various stages of advocacy, lobbying, and negotiation with legislative bodies. With the cooperation of legal experts, the dissemination through media platforms, and the conduct of public demonstrations, feminist organizations were able to create the necessary pressure to support the government's actions. These actions operated in coalition with other human rights activists to strengthen advocacy efforts, using countless reports of rights violations to solicit support from international bodies, which in turn influenced lawmakers both on the national and the international front. To be more precise, the overwhelming amount of studies and surveys carried out by women's solidarity organizations in order to uncover and give voice to the scale of the gender-related problems in workplaces and its negative impact on women's participation in the labor force had a definite influence on the adoption of laws such as the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act.

The Direct Impact of These Laws on Women's Economic Activities and Rights

This process of legislative reform has been driven by the idea of improving women's economic activity and ensuring their rights. The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act notably assisted women because it triggered women's involvement in the workforce. Today more women than ever are employed in workplaces that are safer and more conducive to them, thanks to the legal obligation that organizations have in creating these types of working environments, thus making them more confident in seeking employment or even retaining their jobs and standing firmly in their economic independence. The modifications in the Hudood ordinances and the new laws over honor killings have given both the legal arrangements and the social reforms to women who moved past the regressive traditional norms

towards engaging in economic activities. Thus, these legal provisions provide an ensuring platform for women to seek economic opportunities without fear of inadequate legal measures or social stigma. These laws have brought a paradigm shift in the legal spectrum of women's empowerment, specifically in their rights to own properties, start ventures, and be part of economic decision-making, both at home and across Pakistan's economy.

Societal and Cultural Impacts

Changes in Societal Attitudes

Feminist movements in Pakistan have been instrumental in altering the general public's opinion on women's contribution to economic growth. Traditionally, the leading role of women has been that of a domestic caregiver, but as a result of many decades of these movements and their efforts, perceptions of women's role in society have shifted from home-bound caretakers to a crucial part of the national economy. Many surveys, projects, and polls have proven that public sentiment over women's role in the labor market has seen a major shift. Initiatives such as the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) have not only provided legal backing but also helped change societal norms by making women's presence in offices and industries more accepted and respected (Jafar, 2005). Media campaigns and other publicity and awareness programs promoted by feminist organizations have also contributed significantly to the mentoring of the public on the various benefits of gender diversity in different economic sectors (Shaheed, 1986). Women's economic contributions, which are usually made through cooperative small and medium-sized enterprises supported by microfinance initiatives, are finally getting attention as a big factor for community development and poverty alleviation. This acceptance has enhanced the social image of women in their communities; hence, economic empowerment has improved their social status and, accordingly, their influence (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

Cultural Challenges and Adaptations

The feminist movements have been very triumphant, and they have moved the cultural behavior towards a certain direction, however, these movements have encountered major social obstacles too that compelled them to implement strategic adaptations. Feminist movements in

Pakistan take place under such a backdrop in which Islamic teachings as well as traditional practices have a high impact on social norms and government laws. Activists are now skilled enough to deliver women's rights and economic empowerment issues while remaining within the boundaries of justice and Islamic equality principles, thus making the message more suitable for a larger audience. With the aid of religious books that are associated with women's rights, activists have been engaged in a dialogue with religious leaders and communities (Shaheed, 1994). In the long run, they are attempting to create a supportive order for women's economic activities. Pakistan's diverse ethnic and cultural landscape poses unique challenges in different regions of the country. Feminist movements have adapted their strategies to fit local cultural contexts. For instance, in rural areas where traditional gender roles are more rigid, economic empowerment programs have been introduced gradually, often starting with education and small-scale agricultural activities before moving to more overt economic roles like entrepreneurship (Kabeer, 2001). Misconceptions about feminism as a Western concept that opposes Islamic and cultural values have been a major hurdle. Through educational campaigns, community engagement, and public discussions, feminist activists have worked to demystify feminism and reframe it as a movement aiming to enhance family and community well-being through women's empowerment (Smith, 2005). This approach has helped reduce resistance and increased community support for feminist goals.

Impact Assessment

The role of female economic empowerment programs in Pakistan cannot be overlooked as it helps understand their goals and effects and strategize more informed future planning. The evaluation encompasses diverse outcomes that can be tracked; examples being income levels, employment rates, and educational attainment. Furthermore, it is also imperative to consider both short-term and long-term causal relations, which are vital to achieving sustained economic and social progress.

Increased Income Levels

Microfinance and small business training programs which are usually offered to women have proved to be very productive when it comes to income growth among women in Pakistan. The programs fund small business ventures and deliver business knowledge to women to increase their household income and financial stability. An investigation by Sohail (2014) showed that

households of microfinance program participants on average increased their incomes by 30%, which positively influenced their families' living conditions and resulted in better education and healthcare facilities available for the children.

Enhanced Employment Rates

Women's skills and educational levels have been the basis for the elevated labor force participation. Vocational education programs have proven to be a great resource for training women for the job market, especially for those women who want to make a career in non-traditional jobs like information technology and engineering. Considering that, 60% of women who attended entrepreneurship training at the WECREATE acquired jobs within six months after completion of the training whereas the initial employment rate was 25% among participants.

Educational Attainment

Education reforms are of great significance, and they enable more women to participate in higher education and technical fields. Grants, awareness initiatives, and educational reforms have in whole increased the number of students enrolled in secondary and tertiary education. According to an article in the "Journal of Business Studies Quarterly" (2014), there has been a constant rise in the number of women graduating in STEM fields, reaching above 40% over the last ten years due to the introduction of educational programs and scholarships that are targeted.

Challenges and Barriers

The journey of equality in gender and economic empowerment of women in Pakistan has been quite long and difficult. Feminist movements have encountered resistance not only from traditional cultural norms but also from political and economic structures that are slow to change.

Barriers

Traditional practices and cultural norms in Pakistan regularly inhibit women's economic empowerment. These obstacles are deeply entrenched inside the social fabric and serve to influence women's roles and opportunities in the economic system.

Patriarchal Structure

In many areas of Pakistan, patriarchal family systems prioritize male leadership in each public and personal sphere, proscribing women's autonomy and decision-making power. This cultural norm limits women's participation in financial activities outside of the domains of the household and often confines them to roles that are unpaid or undervalued (Khan & Nazir, 2017). Cultural norms that prefer making an investment in sons' schooling over daughters' notably affect women's financial possibilities. This disparity in academic entry hinders women's potential to compete equally for better-paid jobs and entrepreneurial ventures, perpetuating monetary dependence on male family participants (Jalal, 2015).

Socioeconomic Constraints

Cultural expectancies around marriage often consist of restrictions on women's mobility, that may restrict their potential to have interactions in entrepreneurial circles or seek employment outside the home. These restrictions are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where cultural norms can dictate virtually all aspects of a woman's life (Khan, 2018). Despite legal provisions for equal inheritance, cultural practices often prevent women from claiming their rightful share of family property. This lack of economic resources diminishes their ability to invest in businesses or other economic ventures, significantly affecting their capacity for economic independence (Ali, 2020).

Labor Market Discrimination

Women often face occupational segregation, where they are concentrated in lower-paid, lower-status jobs with fewer benefits and security. Cultural norms that view certain types of work as inappropriate for women exacerbate this issue, limiting women's job options and economic prospects (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Cultural tolerance of gender-based harassment in the workplace further discourages women from participating in the formal economy. Although

legal frameworks exist to address harassment, enforcement is often weak, and cultural stigmas can prevent women from seeking justice (Niaz, 2019).

Political Resistance

Political resistance to feminist movements in Pakistan is often rooted in conservative ideologies that view gender equality as a threat to the existing social order. Feminist initiatives have a high tendency to conflict with political parties that employ religious and traditional slogans to fight reforms that may not be in line with their belief. For one thing, the advancement of women's rights has in some cases encountered legislative obstacles or have been diluted due to religious opposition by political groups in the parliament who contest that such laws contradict Islamic principles. Actions on enactment of family law, including marriage and divorce, have often led to the resentment of conservative lawmakers, leaving the matter of introducing reforms that would economically and socially favor women on the sidelines (Qais et al., 2023).

Cultural Resistance

Feminist movements have to tackle the problem of cultural resistance too, which is one of the biggest difficulties they face. In Pakistan, there is widespread patriarchy – a characteristic that determines where the place of a woman and a man will respectively be in both the public and private spheres. These social norms are, subsequently, reinforced and passed down through different institutions like education, media, and family structures, which all together work to hold the status quo and thus obstruct real change. Practices like dowry, child marriage, and limiting women's mobility still to this day set back women from being economically independent and reaching the same levels in cultural and social power dynamics as men. The opposition by these cultural norms against female activists, including women who are part of feminist movements and seek to overthrow traditional patriarchy, can also be seen in the form of social rejection or even making their lives inherently worse (Shaheed, 1986).

Economic Obstacles

Economical settings in Pakistan stand as one of the main hindrances to women's empowerment. Agriculture, which is the main engine of the economy in the country, offers very limited opportunities for women, especially in rural areas where the majority of women work as unpaid

farm laborers. Women's economic inclusion, even in cities, may be restricted to sectors with lower pay that do not offer much incremental or promotion benefits. Discrimination in hiring, lower salaries, and the absence of career advancement opportunities are the everyday tribulations women have to endure. However, the absence of a supportive framework such as adequate childcare facilities also limits women's ability to be fully involved in the workplace (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

Conclusion

An in-depth exploration of feminist movements and their reforms in the context of Pakistan reveals a vast landscape filled with unique opportunities and obstacles. Future research focusing on the interconnectivity of gender with social classes, ethnic units, and regional inequality would help to develop insights into gender-based barriers to women throughout Pakistan. It is necessary to maintain continuous efforts in exploring and conducting several long-term studies to see the impact of feminist-driven policies and reforms. The studies would evaluate the degree to which the economic status of women has been sustained with time. Increasing the scope of comparative studies, specifically by taking into account similar nations with similar socio-economic and political backgrounds, can offer better insights into learning from their experiences and replicating or implementing them in Pakistan. The rapid advancement of digital technology can also be the key to formulating new approaches to promote the economic empowerment of women. Such approaches can be used in urban as well as rural settings. Policymakers are required to capitalize on the findings of feminism-oriented research to make the national policies not only inclusive but also sensitive to the cultural and regional diversity of Pakistan. Policies should also be supplemented with data about their effectiveness through real-life programs and policy testing. Our legal framework should thus continue to strive for equal treatment of women and protection from any forms of discrimination or violence, which are the principal impediments to the economic participation of women.

Reinforcement of the current legal achievements and also the adoption of much more liberal laws should be at the forefront of governmental agendas. Feminist movements ought to realize the importance of partnerships with government departments, educational institutions, and the private sector, which would provide crucial inputs for the comprehensive empowerment programs designed for female skill training, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship.

International feminist networks that bring in global resources, expertise, and advocacy can also boost the local movement's capacity. Besides targeted advocacy efforts based on specific cultural norms and beliefs, affirmative action on the community level would be effective as well. Modern media sources are well-positioned to highlight the cases-in-point success stories of women's economic empowerment and the ensuing positive impact on society. This approach contributes not only towards the garnering of wider societal support but also drives demand for further reforms.

Creating women-only economic zones where they can start and run businesses in a friendly environment can function as a nursery for the growth of female entrepreneurship in Pakistan. The development of financial products that are particularly suited to women entrepreneurs, such as micro-credit and grants, can effectively assist in overcoming the financial hurdles of starting and growing small businesses for women. Similarly, programs that aim at the leadership skills of women can also be implemented with the aim of preparing them for important roles in the economic sector. Additionally, promoting and advancing gender economics research as an academic discipline can also provide streams of quantitative data and research papers that will nourish female advocacy and policymaking. As this study has shown, the transformative power of organized feminist advocacy is undeniable, and therefore its role in creating an equitable and prosperous society can be enhanced through sustained future efforts.

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