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Media Framing of Women's Freedom Struggle: Insights from Pakistan

ABSTRACT

This study examines the Women's March of 2020 as portrayed on mainstream Pakistani television channels, focusing on the diverse demands for equal rights put forth by women. It analyzes these challenges through the lenses of Islamic and Social Feminism, aligning with current scholarship on women's struggles. The TV talks illuminate the multifaceted challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality and women's rights in Pakistan. It identified that resistance to women's progress and development is embedded in the prevalence of dominant elite ideology in Pakistan, controlled by civil bureaucracy, establishment, and feudal elites who wield significant power. The talk participants acknowledged overlooking women's critical issues and realized more balanced coverage.

Keywords: *Women's struggle, Pakistan television channels, thematic frames, feminism*

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Introduction

This study investigates the portrayal of women's struggle for rights and emancipation in Pakistan—a country where women have fought for equality and legal rights since its inception. This struggle spans Pakistan's history (Bhattacharya, 2014). Women in Pakistan face significant gender discrimination and have continuously fought for their legal rights. According to the 2017 Pakistan census, women make up 48.76% of the population and experience systemic issues due to tribal, feudal, and capitalist social structures as well as socioeconomic disparities. Women encounter various forms of prejudice, including rape, forced marriages, domestic violence, honor killings, and even coerced abortions. Domestic violence, in forms ranging from slapping to murder, is prevalent in Pakistan across all social classes (World Economic Forum, 2014). A United Nations report (2017) indicates that Pakistan ranks lowest in South Asia in terms of education and is second worst globally for gender equality, with a significant gender disparity in school attendance: 56% for males versus 44% for females. This situation is particularly severe in rural areas.

Challenges to Women in Pakistan

According to the World Economic Forum (2014), 80% of Pakistani households experience some form of domestic abuse annually. Pakistan ranked 134th out of 135 countries in terms of gender equality in the Global Gender Gap Report (2020). In 2013, it ranked 123th out of 148 countries (UNDP, 2013). Pakistan was ranked the sixth most dangerous country for women by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (2018). Khan (2020) reported that from 2014 to 2016, Pakistan recorded 15,222 honor crimes, 1,535 burn cases, 1,843 domestic violence cases, 35,935 suicides, 5,508 kidnappings, and 4,734 sexual assault cases. In the Global Gender Gap Index (2022), Pakistan ranks 145 out of 146, with Afghanistan in last place. The index reports Pakistan's lowest female representation in senior and legislative roles (4.5%) and a significant gap in secondary education enrollment, with a 10% gender gap in education and over a 5% gap in health. Of Pakistan's 107 million women, 56.4% face a gender gap (Global Gender Gap Index, 2022). The extensive challenges women in Pakistan face have led to protests and activism against discrimination. Social science and gender studies scholars have identified several major issues. For example, Kishwar and Akhtar (1982) highlight limitations on women's freedom of movement, employment opportunities, and educational access. Dress code restrictions reinforce societal attitudes toward women's inferiority (Kishwar & Akhtar, 1982). Himayatullah and Parveen (1990) discuss employment issues, pointing out that women's work is often limited to low-paid, culturally-bound labor, especially in rural areas. The custom of purdah (veil) is a factor restricting

women's employment and confining them to domestic roles (Himayatullah & Parveen, 1990).

Feudal elites mostly occupy political and civil bureaucracy, which is one of the major causes of the marginalization of women in Pakistan in education, employment, and choice of marriage (Arshad, 2020; Saigol, 2016; Hosseini, 2011; Himayatullah & Parveen, 1990). In this context, women activists criticize the media for the portrayal of women in traditional subordinating roles and males in leadership roles, such as males as doctors and females as nurses. Women activists believe it is a colonial legacy that still impacts our society (Khan et al. 2019; Khan, Qadir, & Aftab 2019; Himayatullah & Parveen 2015; Lind & Salo 2002; Kishwar & Akhtar 1999). According to a cartoon effect study by Rawan, B., Dar, M., & Siraj, S. A. (2018), stereotypical portrayal imposes accretive effects as an incidental leaning on the mind of the audience, and that translates into the daily lives of individuals.

Overview of the Feminist Movement

Feminism originated in 1837 by a French socialist, François Marie Fourier, which is an effort to advocate for equal women's rights, opportunities, and sexuality. Each society in this regard has shaped its explanation (Collins, 2015; Mohanty, 2003). In the West, the feminist movement gained prominence with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Since then, feminist organizations have advocated for legal reforms addressing property rights, employment, pay equity, and reproductive rights. Media has been crucial in promoting women's rights since the late 1970s (Loke et al., 2015; Wetschanow, 1999).

A Brief of Feminism in Pakistan

In Pakistan, two main forms of feminist discourse exist: Muslim Feminism and Social Feminism. Muslim Feminism advocates for women's rights within Islamic law, while Social Feminism promotes human rights independent of religious constraints. According to Mehreen (2014), feminism in Pakistan is sometimes misperceived as anti-Muslim, though Islam does recognize women's rights in areas such as education and marriage. Jaweria and Khalid (2012) found that conservative groups accuse civil organizations working for women's rights of misleading them. Butt (2000) finds that Pakistan television dramas often frame the female as weak, subordinate, and lacking realism. Tabassum and Amin (2020) criticize this sort of women's portrayal by skewing societal perceptions about women's independence. Rural women in Pakistan often face significant inequalities, with purdah (veiling to cover the entire body) being a customary practice that limits their employment opportunities and confines them to domestic roles. This practice discourages

women from pursuing work outside the home (Arshad, 2020; Saigol, 2016; Himayatullah & Parveen, 1990).

Nevertheless, there are also good women portrayals of women on the issues in print and electronic media (Khan et al., 2019). Historically, women's rights movements in Pakistan have made gradual strides, with figures such as Fatima Jinnah and Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan leading the charge for women's welfare. The Women's Action Forum (WMA), established in 1981, emerged as a key organization advocating for women's rights. The modern feminist movement gained momentum in the 1980s in response to General Zia-ul-Haq's Hudood Ordinance, which required extensive evidence in rape cases. This movement under the Benazir regime gained momentum further with the arrival of private TV channels and social media. The Aurat March in 2020 signifies this movement.

Literature Review

The media narrative on feminism significantly impacted society's societal perceptions of women, as the media portrayed women as weak, passive, dependent, less rational, and more emotional (Watkins & Emerson, 2010; Kearney, 2006). However, Cragin (2010) views television talk shows as instrumental for the women's struggle movement to use as platforms for their voices (Watkins & Emerson, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that the feminist movement worldwide is facing many challenges. The gravity is more severe in Muslim countries for their fight for equal rights in education, politics, opportunities, marriage choices, divorce, dress codes, and others (Cragin, 2010; Watkins, 2016; Lind & Salo, 2002). The multifaceted challenges of the feminist movement embedded in society's ideological perspective are often oversimplified in mainstream media as a social deviation (Wetschanow, 1999). Critics view the media framing of the movement as disturbing and contaminated and note the media framing is coining a narrative of a new stereotype showcasing women as superwomen (Whelehan, 2000; Loke et al., 2015; Wetschanow, 1999). Watkins and Emerson (2016) state women's issues in the media are regularly marginalized and overlooked.

The ideology of any society has always been a dominant narrative reflecting a cultural framework that shapes classes and social groups. Media always works as a mouthpiece for the dominant ideology and serves for the continuation of the power dynamics. Media is used to maintain the status quo work for the economy, and power elites usually pay less attention to deviant groups. (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Becker, 1984; Hall, 1909). Sociological factors like political, economic, legal, and regulatory influence media content creation (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). These factors are solely responsible for the growth and development of women in society and are similarly employed in Pakistani settings.

Social Feminism Perspective

Social Feminists advocate for women's freedom and gender equality based on principles of liberty. They argue that women should assume roles and positions traditionally associated with men to gain power and assert equality (Hooks, 2000). Social Feminism critiques the media's portrayal of women for reinforcing social norms and calls for legal reforms to protect women's rights (Cooke, 2000; Saigol, 2016).

Islamic Feminism Perspective

Muslim Feminism emerged in the 1990s, emphasizing women's rights through Islamic teachings. This discourse argues that women's societal roles contribute to social harmony and rejects interpretations that view women as inferior (Badran, 2009; Hosseini, 2011). However, Muslim Feminists contend that Islam's principles support gender equity and that the faith's teachings are often misinterpreted by patriarchal structures (Arshad, 2020; Saigol, 2016).

Critics suggest that Muslim-majority societies often evaluate ideologies through an Islamic lens, leading to debates on women's rights within religious contexts (Badran, 2009). This can be evident from the study by Siraj, S. A. (2012) on the analysis of Islamophobia in the West and the media, as Western feminism frequently views Islam as a barrier to women's progress. Muslim Feminists argue that Islam promotes a balanced and interconnected social structure (Ziba et al., 1993; Badran, 2009).

This Study

This study builds upon earlier research on media portrayals of women by focusing on the sociological and ideological frameworks shaping the representation of women's struggles in Pakistan. It delves into core constructs such as the patriarchal system, women's emancipation, and women's independence, with a primary focus on women's demand for absolute rights, encapsulated in the slogan "My Body My Right." This bold demand for women's liberation is relatively new and unprecedented in Pakistan, a Third World country with a predominantly Muslim population. The study also examines how women's independence is portrayed from the perspectives of Muslim and Social Feminism.

The significance of this study lies in the role of television talk shows as a platform for raising awareness among the audience about women's issues. Talk shows on mainstream television play a pivotal role in constructing mediated reality. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the major themes emerging from the Aurat March 2020 in Pakistan and their coverage in major television talk shows.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Research Questions

- RQ1: To what extent did the Islamic and social feminists' perspectives receive coverage in the Television Talk Shows, and what was the meantime length?
- RQ2: What is the relationship between thematic frames and feminist perspectives across all the themes in the talk shows on Aurat March 2020?
- RQ3: To what extent did Muslim and social feminists' perspectives receive coverage in the television talk shows on Aurat in March 2020?
- RQ4: What is the relationship between women's fundamental rights and the Muslim feminist perspective?

Hypotheses

- H1: There is a likelihood that the theme 'Fundamental Rights' will receive more coverage and a high mean time length in the television talk shows.
- H2: The Muslim feminist perspective will dominate the discussion across all the frequency and meantime length themes in Aurat March 2020.
- H3: There will be a relationship between women's independence and the Muslim feminist perspective in the television talk shows on Aurat in March 2020.

Methodology

The study focuses on the women's struggle in Pakistan, a topic of great significance for mass media researchers. In recent decades, Pakistani media has evolved significantly, introducing new genres like interactive television talk shows that engage in discursive debates on controversial issues, including religion and gender. The Aurat March 2020 garnered substantial media coverage. This study employs a quantitative design with a framing approach to analyze the women's struggle in Pakistan from a feminist perspective.

Study population

This study examines the portrayal of the Aurat March 2020 in Urdu-language talk shows on leading private Pakistani news channels. The selected channels (ARY, BOL, DUNYA, GEO, and SAMA TV) are well-regarded for their viewership and influence on public opinion. These channels frequently host

discussions on social issues and feature prominent figures from government, academia, and related professions.

Data Collection

Content analysis was used to analyze **25 talk shows** aired between February 29 and March 10, **2020**, discussing the Aurat March. The study employed the **census method**, including all relevant episodes from the selected channels. Data was retrieved from the channels' database archives, focusing on verbal exchanges between the host and guests on key themes. Visuals, graphs, speeches, and posters were excluded from the analysis.

Themes and Operationalization

Autonomy: The ability of individuals to make independent decisions in personal, professional, or political contexts.

Fundamental Rights: Basic human rights essential for individual dignity, such as freedom of speech, education, and privacy.

Women's Empowerment: Increasing women's social, economic, political, and legal strength to ensure equal rights and opportunities.

Violence: The use of physical force or power that results in harm, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and community violence.

Patriarchy: A traditional societal system consistently empowers men over female in leadership, authority, and control over property.

Women and Development: The inclusivity of women's role in the societal development process and their access to resources and opportunities.

Frame Identification

In the study, the identification of frames was based on a contextual standpoint within the entire talk show. Two major frames, '**Islamic**' and '**Western**' feminist, were identified in the themes' discussions. For example, if the debate was dominantly related to Islamic or Western feminist perspectives on themes such as 'Women's Empowerment' or 'Women's Autonomy,' the frame was coded accordingly.

Coding Framework

A comprehensive content categorization scheme was developed to analyze the debates based on themes, frames, and coding rules. All discussions were assessed according to the research questions and hypotheses. The Unit of

analysis for the themes used in the study includes autonomy, fundamental rights, women's empowerment, crimes against women, the patriarchal system, and women's development. Similarly, the frames used for the study were '**Islamic**' and '**Western**' feminist perspectives identified within the debated themes. The coding rules were based on the recording and contextual unit established for each theme and frame using the dominant coding method.

Results

This study primarily examined how thematic frames, especially Fundamental Rights and women's Independence, were discussed in television talk shows from a Muslim feminist perspective. While some discussions on the social feminist approach occurred, they were much less frequent than those focused on the Muslim perspective. Importantly, no statistically significant difference was found in the mean duration of discussions between the two perspectives across various themes. However, issues such as violence against women, injustice, patriarchy, and women's empowerment received notably less attention in these conversations. The study used descriptive and inferential statistics to find the sample and target population results. A similar method was used in the study by Siraj, S. A., & Hussain, S. (2016) on Journalism in Pakistan: Practice and Function.

Table 1
Themes discussed on the TV channels on Aurat March

| Themes | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Autonomy | 160 | 23.5 |
| Fundamental Rights | 292* | 42.9 |
| Women Empowerment | 23 | 3.4 |
| Violence | 95 | 14.0 |
| Patriarchy | 90 | 13.2 |
| Women and Development | 20 | 2.9 |
| Total | 680 | 100.0 |

* $\chi^2(5) = 457.512$, $p < .001$

Results in Tables 1 and 2 answer research questions 1 and 2 and hypothesis 1. The frequency of thematic frames on the Aurat march is presented in Table 1, indicating that the selected television channels discussed the theme of Fundamental Rights most frequently, with 292 occurrences representing 42.9% of the coverage. This finding was statistically significant, as

demonstrated by the Chi-Square Test ($\chi^2 = 457.512$; $p < 0.001$). Following this, the theme of Autonomy appeared 160 times (23.5%), while Violence Against Women was covered 95 times (14.0%). Other themes, such as Patriarchy (90 occurrences, 13.2%) and Women and Development (20 occurrences, 2.9%), received comparatively less attention. Overall, a total of 680 instances of thematic frames were analyzed. The hypothesis positing that 'Fundamental Rights would receive higher coverage in television talk shows than other thematic frames concerning women's struggles in Pakistan' was supported. In contrast, the themes of Women's Empowerment and Women and Development received the least attention among the selected television talk shows.

Table 2 outlines the thematic framing of TV talk shows about feminist slants. It indicates that Liberal and Social Islamic perspectives accounted for 81 occurrences (18.8%), Neutral perspectives for 231 occurrences (53.7%), and Total occurrences at 430 (100.0%). The Chi-Square Test results showed significant differences among the themes, with a test statistic of 85.205, $p < 0.001$.

Table 2
Themes of the TV Talk Shows

| Feminist Slants | Freq. & % |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| Liberal and Social | 81 (18.8) |
| Islamic | 231 (53.7) |
| Neutral | 118 (27.4) |
| Total | 430 (100.0) |

$\chi^2(2) = 85.205$, $p < .001$

Table 3 presents the distribution of thematic frames across three feminist perspectives: social, Islamic, and neutral, based on 430 responses. The Islamic perspective dominates with 53.7% ($n = 231$), followed by the neutral perspective at 27.4% ($n = 118$) and the social perspective at 18.8% ($n = 81$). In terms of autonomy, the Islamic perspective leads with 62 (14.4%), while the social perspective has 41 (9.5%) and the neutral perspective only 3 (0.7%). For fundamental rights, the Islamic perspective again shows the highest count at 85 (19.8%), with the neutral perspective at 55 (12.8%) and the social perspective at 30 (7.0%). Women's employment is notably low, with 0 (0.0%) in the social perspective, 7 (1.6%) in the Islamic perspective, and 10 (2.3%) in the neutral perspective. Violence and justice are most pronounced in the neutral perspective (43, 10.0%), compared to the Islamic (18, 4.2%) and social perspectives (1, 0.2%). The Chi-square test indicates a significant association between perspectives and themes,

$\chi^2(10) = 136.97, p < 0.001$, highlights that the fundamental rights for women within the Islamic perspective are significantly different than other themes and within the perspective.

Table 3
Thematic Frames and Feminist Perspectives

| | Autonomy | Fundamental Rights | Women Employment | Violence & Justice | Patriarchy | Women Development | Total |
|----------------|-------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Perspectives | Count, % | Count, % | Count, % | Count, % | Count, % | Count, % | Count, % |
| Social | 41 (9.5%) | 30 (7.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (0.2%) | 5 (1.2%) | 3 (0.7%) | 81 (18.8%) |
| Islamic | 62 (14.4%) | 85 (19.8%) | 7 (1.6%) | 18 (4.2%) | 51 (11.9%) | 7 (1.6%) | 231 (53.7%) |
| Neutral | 3 (0.7%) | 55 (12.8%) | 10 (2.3%) | 43 (10.0%) | 7 (1.6%) | 0 (0.0%) | 118 (27.4%) |
| Total | 106 (24.7%) | 170 (39.5%) | 17 (4.0%) | 62 (14.4%) | 63 (14.7%) | 10 (2.3%) | 430 (100.0%) |

$\chi^2(10) = 136.97, p < 0.001$.

Results in Table 4 answer the research question, and analyzed cross-analysis in Table 3 shows that most TV channels emphasize Islamic feminist themes, particularly Fundamental Rights and Autonomy. This focus is highest on BOL News (62.3%) and Dunya News (52.9%), which frequently frames women's rights from a religious perspective. GEO News, with 47.3% coverage of Islamic feminism, also incorporates a significant proportion of Neutral perspectives, indicating a broader approach. Social feminist themes, which challenge patriarchy and advocate for women's independence, are less represented overall but appear notably on GEO News (27.5%) and ARY News (13.5%). Neutral perspectives, mainly addressing Violence Against Women and Fundamental Rights without ideological bias, are most present on ARY News (48.6%) and Dunya News (35.5%). These trends suggest a media landscape aligned with Islamic values, though some channels, especially GEO News and ARY News, reflect diverse feminist perspectives. The Chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 138.150, p < .001$) indicates that **Dunya News** and **BOL News** have a marked tendency toward the Islamic feminist viewpoint in portraying women's issues.

Table 4
Feminist Perspectives by TV Channels in Talk Shows on Aurat March 2020

| TV Channel | Social (n, %) | Islamic (n, %) | Neutral (n, %) | Total (n, %) |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| ARY News | 5 (13.5%) | 14 (37.8%) | 18 (48.6%) | 37 (100%) |
| BOL News | 12 (17.4%) | 43 (62.3%) | 14 (20.3%) | 69 (100%) |
| Dunya News | 14 (11.6%) | 64 (52.9%) | 43 (35.5%) | 121 (100%) |
| GEO News | 25 (27.5%) | 43 (47.3%) | 23 (25.3%) | 91 (100%) |
| SA.A. News | 25 (22.3%) | 67 (59.8%) | 20 (17.9%) | 112 (100%) |
| Total | 81 (18.8%) | 231 (53.7%) | 118 (27.4%) | 430 (100%) |

$\chi^2 (7) = 138.150, p < .001$

Discussion

This study holds significant importance in shedding light on the challenges faced by women in Pakistan and how these struggles are portrayed in the country's mainstream electronic media. It offers a deeper understanding of how electronic media frames the narrative surrounding women's issues in Pakistan.

Previous research on the portrayal of women in media often focused on themes such as the patriarchal family system, objectification of women, women's emancipation, their roles in the workplace, and various crimes against women. However, this study takes a sociological and ideological perspective in examining how the media portrays women's struggles in Pakistan, particularly highlighting the unique demand for absolute rights encapsulated in the slogan "My Body My Right." This demand challenges the fundamental ideology of Pakistan as an Islamic republic, highlighting the complexity of addressing such issues in a country with unique socio-cultural and political dynamics.

In contrast to Islamic values, this study reveals that the dominant perspective in Pakistani television talk shows leans towards Islamic feminism rather than a social feminist perspective. Nevertheless, the talk show also excessively discussed women's issues, independence, equal rights, the choice of messages, equal opportunities, political participation, and other spheres of life. There were also discussions on women's issues relating to divorce, injustice, gender disparities, patriarchy, and protection of women against crime and violence. This portrayal underscores the prevailing notion of women being treated as subordinates. These points were also highlighted in previous studies.

The study's findings on the unequal treatment of women in rural areas, wages, and employment opportunities align with prior research. The study also reckons the issue of *purdah* in rural Pakistan is a major roadblock to

women's employment and their contribution to society, resulting in priceless stay-at-home. Additionally, the findings are quite parallel to the dominant elite ideology of Pakistan, where political, civil bureaucracy, establishment, and feudal elites wield significant power and resist the progress of women.

Conclusion

This study provides, on the whole, useful acumens of the multilayered challenges within the complex milieu of sociocultural and political factors making women's lives difficult. Despite this, television talk shows played a crucial role in shaping public awareness of women's issues, primarily from a Muslim feminist perspective—further dialogue on women's issues and continued efforts to dismantle barriers to their advancement and societal empowerment.

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