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Gender Discrimination in Pakistan: A Qualitative Exploration and Policy Directions

Imran Ullah Khan
Assistant Professor, Department of Public Policy and Administration, Hazara University, Mansehra-Pakistan. dr.imranullah@hu.edu.pk
Imtiaz Ahmad Khalil
Deputy Librarian, Hazara University, Mansehra. imtiazahmadkhalil@gmail.com
Arif Muhammad
MPhil Scholar, Department of Sociology, Hazara University Mansehra-Pakistan. arifsociologist@hu.edu.pk
Shakeel Ahmad*
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Hazara University, Mansehra-Pakistan. Corresponding Author Email: shakeel.sociologist@gmail.com / shakeel.soicologist@hu.edu.pk. ORCID ID. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1902-8698

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employs a constructivist grounded theory methodology to investigate the complex socio-cultural, religious, and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate gender discrimination in contemporary Pakistan. Through systematic analysis of secondary qualitative data from 2018–2023—including scholarly research, policy evaluations, organizational reports, and media discourse—the research explores how Pakistani women experience, navigate, and interpret discrimination across diverse regional, class, and social contexts. The findings reveal that gender inequality is sustained through three interconnected processes: (1) navigated agency, where women exercise strategic resilience within patriarchal constraints, often at significant emotional cost; (2) contested legitimacy, whereby religious texts and cultural norms are selectively interpreted and deployed to both justify and challenge discriminatory practices; and (3) layered implementation, which explains the persistent gap between progressive gender legislation and lived realities due to institutional and street-level failures. The study contributes an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes Islamic feminist, social constructionist, and intersectional perspectives, moving beyond polarized secular-religious debates. It argues that effective intervention requires simultaneous engagement with religious discourse, structural reform, and grassroots agency. Accordingly, the paper

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concludes with targeted policy directions aimed at state institutions, religious authorities, civil society, and media. Recommendations include establishing gender-responsive implementation audits, promoting Islamic feminist scholarship, investing in gender-sensitive infrastructure, and strengthening community-based support systems. By offering a nuanced, contextually grounded analysis, this research provides evidence-based insights for advancing gender justice in Pakistan through culturally resonant and structurally transformative strategies.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Pakistan, Islamic feminism, navigated agency, contested legitimacy, policy implementation, qualitative research, intersectionality, grounded theory

1. Introduction

Gender discrimination in Pakistan represents a profound and persistent development challenge, entrenched within a complex matrix of constitutional guarantees, contested religious interpretations, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, and enduring structural inequalities (World Bank, 2023). Despite progressive constitutional commitments to equality under Article 25 and explicit provisions for women's participation in national life under Article 34, a significant implementation gap persists. This chasm between de jure rights and de facto realities positions Pakistan as a critical case study for examining how socio-cultural and religious forces mediate the translation of legal frameworks into lived experience. The nation ranks 142nd out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2023), a stark indicator of systemic disparities in education, economic participation, health, and political empowerment. Statistical profiles reveal a troubling landscape: female literacy lags significantly behind male literacy (51.9% versus 73.4%), women's labor force participation remains at a mere 22.6% compared to 81.1% for men, and maternal mortality ratios are among the highest in South Asia (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022; National Commission on the Status of Women, 2022).

However, this landscape is not monolithic nor static. Significant counter-currents challenge the narrative of unrelenting oppression, including rising female enrollment in higher education—now nearing parity at 48% of total enrollment—the vibrant digital activism of movements like the Aurat March, and incremental legislative reforms against gender-based violence (Higher Education Commission,

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2022; Toor, 2022). This contradiction underscores the inadequacy of simplistic, mono-causal explanations and highlights the necessity for nuanced research that attends to complexity, agency, and context-specific dynamics. Pakistan's unique historical trajectory, born from the partition of British India as a homeland for Muslims, has perpetually involved negotiating tensions between its Islamic identity and modernist state-building projects, with gender serving as a primary battleground for these ideological contests (Jalal, 2021).

This study addresses a critical lacuna in existing scholarship: the persistent attribution gap wherein cultural practices are routinely conflated with religious mandates (Ali, 2021; Charrad, 2021). This conflation, employed directionally, obscures the actual drivers of inequality. Conservative elements often defend patriarchal customs as immutable religious requirements, while secular critiques sometimes incorrectly interpret gender disparities as direct manifestations of Islamic teachings, neglecting similar patterns in non-Muslim societies with comparable socio-economic structures. This analytical confusion has tangible consequences, leading to policy interventions that are either culturally dissonant and ineffective or that inadvertently reinforce patriarchal arrangements under the guise of religious authenticity. Furthermore, significant research gaps persist. A methodological bias toward quantitative studies often misses the nuanced, lived experiences of discrimination (Khan, 2021). Theoretical approaches remain siloed, with few studies integrating Islamic feminist, political economy, and institutional perspectives. Geographically, generalizations from Punjab or Sindh often neglect the distinct gender regimes of Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and tribal regions.

To bridge these gaps, the research is guided by three interconnected questions:

1. How do Pakistani women from diverse social locations experience, perceive, and navigate gender discrimination across spheres of family, education, workplace, and public life?
2. How do interpretations of Islamic teachings intersect with, reinforce, or challenge cultural traditions to shape prevailing gender norms and identities?
3. What structural, discursive, and interactional mechanisms sustain gender discrimination despite progressive legal and policy frameworks, and how might they be disrupted?

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Employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology, this paper analyzes a rich corpus of secondary qualitative data (2018-2023)—including academic studies, organizational reports, policy evaluations, and media discourse—to develop a contextually-grounded theoretical framework. By integrating Islamic feminist perspectives with social constructionist and intersectional theories, the study moves beyond polarized debates to offer a holistic analysis. Its ultimate aim is to generate evidence-based, culturally resonant policy directions for stakeholders—policymakers, religious leaders, civil society, and development partners—committed to advancing gender justice in Pakistan. This research contributes to the growing literature on "Southern theory," developing frameworks from within the Global South that challenge Eurocentric assumptions while remaining deeply engaged with local realities (Connell, 2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Foundations and the Evolution of Gendered Citizenship

The contemporary gender order in Pakistan cannot be understood in isolation from its historical lineage, a palimpsest of influences that have shaped modern conceptions of gendered citizenship. Pre-colonial South Asian societies were characterized by deeply patriarchal structures, codified in Brahmanical texts like the *Manusmriti* (200 BCE - 200 CE), which established enduring patterns of female dependency, denying women property rights and autonomous legal personhood (Doniger, 2019; Roy, 2020). The advent of Islamic rule introduced a complex, competing legal and ethical framework. The Mughal period (1526-1857) presented profound contradictions: elite women, such as Empress Nur Jahan, wielded significant political and economic power, while the institutionalization of *purdah* (seclusion) among aristocracy established norms of female modesty and spatial segregation that would gradually permeate other social strata (Lal, 2021; Bano, 2019). Regional variations were pronounced, with Sufi-influenced areas like Punjab and Sindh often allowing women greater mobility and participation in religious life compared to regions with stronger orthodox or Brahmanical influences (Memon, 2020).

British colonial rule (1858-1947) introduced transformative yet paradoxical forces. Colonial administrators imported Victorian ideals of domestic femininity, positioning women as moral guardians of the private sphere (Bannerji, 2020).

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Simultaneously, missionary education and colonial legalism created unintended avenues for female advancement, particularly for Christian and lower-caste Hindu women, while also codifying certain patriarchal customary laws related to property and inheritance (Seth, 2019; Kapila & Bates, 2018). The colonial period also birthed social reform movements that centered the "woman question," though often within paradigms emphasizing moral uplift and educated motherhood rather than structural equality, setting a precedent for later state-led feminisms (Devji, 2021).

The post-independence state-building project (1947-1970) cemented a pattern of contradictory gender governance. Early constitutional debates revealed a fundamental tension between secular modernists, who envisioned women as equal citizens central to national development, and religious conservatives, who advocated for gender-complementary roles rooted in specific Islamic interpretations (Jamal, 2019). This tension produced an ambiguous legal landscape that guaranteed equality in principle while permitting religiously-justified exceptions in practice—a duality that continues to define Pakistan's gender policy challenges. State-sponsored women's organizations emerged during this period, but they typically operated within sanctioned parameters, focusing on welfare and maternal health rather than contesting foundational patriarchal structures (Rouse, 2020). This historical trajectory reveals that contemporary gender discrimination is not an accident but the product of specific historical negotiations between colonialism, nationalism, religion, and modernity.

2.2 Islamic Teachings: Between Textual Egalitarianism and Interpretive Patriarchy

A rich and contested scholarly tradition examines the multifaceted Islamic discourse on gender, which is central to any analysis of Pakistan. At the textual level, the Quran contains approximately 200 verses addressing women's status, rights, and responsibilities. Key verses establish foundational principles of spiritual equality and ethical reciprocity. Quran 33:35 unequivocally promises identical spiritual rewards to righteous men and women across multiple categories of virtue. Quran 2:228 states women have rights "similar to those (of men) over them in kindness," and Quran 4:1 emphasizes the common origin of humanity from a single soul (*nafs wahida*), providing a theological basis for essential equality that contrasts with the Judeo-

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Christian rib narrative (Wadud, 2018; Barlas, 2019). Furthermore, Quranic provisions granting women rights to property, inheritance, and contractual capacity were revolutionary in seventh-century Arabia.

However, the transition from revelatory text to historical tradition involved complex processes of interpretation, codification, and institutionalization that often privileged hierarchical elements. Classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), developed between the 8th and 12th centuries, emerged within patriarchal social contexts and reflected the assumptions of its predominantly male interpreters (Ali, 2021). Legal schools developed sophisticated frameworks for marriage, divorce, inheritance, and testimony that institutionalized gender differentiation, though with notable variations between *madhahib* (legal schools). The narrative of "the closing of the gates of *ijtihad*" (independent reasoning), while contested by scholars, symbolizes the solidification of particular patriarchal interpretations within mainstream religious discourse (Ahmed, 2020).

The colonial and post-colonial periods spurred new engagements with Islamic gender teachings. Reformists like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated for women's education within Islamic boundaries, while others like Egypt's Qasim Amin pushed for more transformative change (Haddad, 2019). The 20th century saw the rise of state-sponsored "feminisms" where governments selectively employed Islamic arguments to justify limited reforms. The most significant contemporary development is the emergence of Islamic feminism as a distinct intellectual and activist movement. Scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Kecia Ali, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini employ critical hermeneutics to re-read Islamic texts through gender-justice lenses (Wadud, 2018; Barlas, 2019; Ali, 2021; Mir-Hosseini, 2021). They emphasize the Quran's ethical trajectory, differentiate between universal principles and time-bound applications, and critically examine the historical construction of patriarchal jurisprudence. These debates have direct resonance in Pakistan, where women's rights advocates strategically navigate between secular constitutional arguments and Islamic feminist reinterpretations to advance their claims (Zia, 2020; Khan, 2021).

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2.3 Contemporary Dynamics: Intersectionality, Regional Variation, and Heterogeneous Realities

Contemporary scholarship decisively rejects homogenous portrayals of "the Pakistani woman," emphasizing instead profound heterogeneity shaped by intersectional factors. Cheema and Naseer (2022) delineate four distinct gender regimes: 1) *Urban elite contexts* with high education and professional access but intense pressure to conform to respectable femininity; 2) *Urban middle/lower-class contexts* characterized by tension between economic necessity (driving female employment) and cultural expectations of domesticity; 3) *Rural agrarian contexts* with strong patriarchal control and limited female mobility, yet significant (if invisible) economic contributions; and 4) *Tribal and frontier regions* where customary law (*riwaj*) often overrides both Islamic principles and state law, imposing extreme restrictions.

An intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 2020; Collins, 2019) reveals how gender discrimination compounds with other axes of marginalization. Class is a fundamental determinant: a poor woman in rural Sindh experiences radically different constraints than an affluent woman in Lahore (Khan, 2021). Ethnicity and region intersect powerfully; Pashtun women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa navigate the dual, often conflicting, pressures of *Pashtunwali* (the tribal code) and state law (Shinwari, 2020). Religious minority women face compounded discrimination: Christian and Hindu women experience both gender-based and religious marginalization, while Ahmadi women confront state-sanctioned persecution alongside patriarchal constraints (I. Rehman, 2022). Caste and *biradari* (kinship network) affiliations further stratify experiences, with lower-caste women often relegated to stigmatized labor (A. Rehman, 2021).

The urban-rural divide constitutes a major fault line, creating divergent life trajectories. Urban women benefit from greater access to education, healthcare, employment, and relative anonymity, yet also face harassment in public spaces, commercialized beauty standards, and the "double burden" of work and domestic duties without extended family support (Hussain, 2020). Rural women, while facing stricter mobility controls, may access stronger kinship networks and experience more integrated work-family lives in agrarian settings, with their traditional

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knowledge sometimes holding value (Nagar & Raju, 2021). These complexities caution against one-size-fits-all policy solutions and underscore the need for granular, context-specific analysis.

2.4 Theoretical Explanations and the Imperative for Integration

Academic literature offers diverse, often competing, theoretical frameworks to explain Pakistan's persistent gender inequality. Modernization theory, particularly in contemporary formulations by scholars like Inglehart and Norris (2019), posits a linear, evolutionary relationship between socio-economic development (urbanization, education, wealth) and the adoption of egalitarian gender attitudes. Pakistan presents a puzzle for this theory, as decades of economic growth and educational expansion have not produced commensurate shifts in core gender attitudes or practices, suggesting the theory's limitations in accounting for cultural and religious path-dependencies (Ali & Raza, 2020).

Cultural and religious explanations emphasize the role of belief systems and traditional values. Some scholars argue that specific interpretations of Islam inherently promote gender hierarchy through theological doctrines and legal frameworks (Fish, 2020). Others highlight the interaction of pre-Islamic cultural traditions—caste systems, tribal honor codes—with religious teachings to produce distinctive patterns of gender regulation (Charrad, 2021). However, comparative studies reveal significant variation in gender outcomes across Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Tunisia vs. Pakistan), indicating that political and economic structures mediate religious influence, rendering religion alone an insufficient explanation (Moghadam, 2021).

Political economy approaches examine how state formation, colonial legacies, and economic structures institutionalize inequality. Feminist political economists analyze how Pakistan's development path—marked by high military expenditure, uneven industrialization, and dependency on international financial institutions—has created segmented labor markets, unequal property rights, and inadequate social services that disproportionately disadvantage women (Khan, 2021). The "military-mullah nexus" thesis, advanced by scholars like Ayesha Siddiqa (2021) and Aqil Shah (2022), explores how alliances between religious conservatives and the military establishment have often promoted patriarchal gender norms as part of broader

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authoritarian projects, using gender ideology to legitimize power structures and marginalize progressive voices.

Feminist institutionalism focuses on how laws, policies, and organizational practices shape gendered outcomes. This literature scrutinizes Pakistan's contradictory legal architecture: progressive constitutional clauses and specific women's rights laws coexist with discriminatory personal laws, weak enforcement mechanisms, and customary legal systems that routinely override statutory protections (Jamal, 2019). The 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010), which devolved many powers to provinces, created a patchwork of gender policies across federating units, leading to uneven progress (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2022). Institutionalist analyses also reveal how ostensibly gender-neutral policies in taxation, trade, or infrastructure have differential impacts due to pre-existing inequalities.

Postcolonial and decolonial feminist theories offer critical perspectives on how global power relations and development discourses shape local gender politics. These approaches critique the imposition of Western feminist frameworks via international development programming without adequate engagement with local histories and meaning systems (Zia, 2020). They also analyze how Pakistan's gender politics are shaped by its position in global hierarchies and its navigation of competing modernities (Toor, 2022), advocating for feminist theorizing grounded in local historical experience.

This review underscores that no single theoretical framework is adequate. This study therefore argues for and employs an *integrated theoretical approach* that synthesizes insights from these traditions to capture the synergistic interplay of religion, culture, economics, politics, and institutions in producing and sustaining gender discrimination.

3. Methodology

This study is guided by a constructivist paradigm, viewing reality as socially constructed through meaning-making and interaction. Within this paradigm, it employs a constructivist grounded theory methodology, as developed by Charmaz (2020). Grounded theory is particularly suited for exploring complex social processes where existing theories may be insufficient, as it prioritizes the

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development of explanatory frameworks that emerge directly from the data. The constructivist variant emphasizes the co-creation of knowledge between researcher and data, acknowledging the researcher's positionality while systematically building theory from empirical evidence.

3.1 Adaptation for Secondary Qualitative Data Analysis

While traditional grounded theory involves primary data collection, this study adapts the methodology for rigorous secondary analysis of existing qualitative research—an approach validated by scholars like Thorne (2020). This adaptation is strategically chosen for several reasons: it allows synthesis of insights across a wide geographic and temporal range; it provides access to sensitive contexts and populations where primary research might be ethically or logistically challenging; and it enables theoretical development by re-analyzing existing rich data through a new integrative lens. The existing qualitative studies are treated as "data" to be coded, categorized, and theoretically integrated.

3.2 Data Collection and Theoretical Sampling

A purposive theoretical sampling strategy was employed to build a diverse and rich dataset. Sampling was iterative, guided by emerging concepts rather than predetermined criteria. The goal was to select sources that could best illuminate the research questions and help develop robust theoretical categories. The final corpus comprises 165 sources from 2018-2023, ensuring contemporaneity and relevance. Sources include:

1. **Academic Qualitative Studies (n=47):** Peer-reviewed ethnographies, interview-based studies, narrative research, and participatory action research identified via databases (JSTOR, SAGE, Google Scholar) using keywords like "gender Pakistan qualitative," "women Pakistan ethnography."
2. **Organizational Reports (n=28):** Qualitative research from Pakistani CSOs (Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah) and international NGOs (UN Women, Amnesty International), offering ground-level insights often missed in academia.
3. **Policy Evaluations (n=15):** Qualitative assessments of gender laws and programs, providing data on implementation gaps and stakeholder perspectives.
4. **Media Analysis (n=75):** In-depth features, investigative reports, and op-eds from major Pakistani newspapers (Dawn, The News) and magazines, capturing

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public discourse and lived narratives.

5. **Creative/Narrative Works (n=select):** Autobiographies, oral histories, and fiction by Pakistani women, offering subjective, experiential depth.

Sampling continued until **theoretical saturation** was achieved—the point where additional data yielded no new properties for the developed categories but merely confirmed existing insights.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis followed the systematic, iterative stages of constructivist grounded theory:

1. **Initial Coding:** Conducting line-by-line open coding of data excerpts. This involved attaching descriptive, action-oriented labels (often using gerunds like "negotiating," "resisting," "justifying") to capture processes. Approximately 1,500 initial codes were generated.
2. **Focused Coding:** Synthesizing initial codes into more selective, conceptual categories. This required constant comparative analysis—comparing codes across different sources and contexts. For example, codes like "justifying education restrictions" and "explaining mobility limits" were grouped into the focused category "legitimizing discrimination through discourse."
3. **Theoretical Categorization:** Developing abstract, theoretical categories that captured core social processes. Categories were refined by defining their properties, dimensions, and boundaries. Key categories that emerged included "Paradoxical Inclusion-Exclusion," "Strategic Religious Deployment," and "Emotional Labor of Navigation."
4. **Theoretical Integration:** Weaving the categories into a coherent theoretical framework that explains the central phenomenon. Memo-writing was essential here, facilitating the exploration of relationships between categories. The core theoretical integration resulted in the model of Navigated Agency, Contested Legitimacy, and Layered Implementation.

3.4 Ensuring Rigor and Addressing Ethical Considerations

The study employed multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness, adapting criteria from Lincoln and Guba (2019):

- **Credibility:** Achieved through triangulation (cross-checking insights across

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academic, organizational, and media sources), prolonged engagement with data, peer debriefing with fellow researchers, and informal member-checking by discussing findings with Pakistani gender scholars.

- **Transferability:** Sought through "thick description" of contexts and purposive sampling across diverse regions and social groups, allowing readers to assess applicability to other settings.
- **Dependability:** Maintained via a detailed audit trail documenting all analytical decisions and reflexive journaling to track the evolution of interpretations.
- **Confirmability:** Ensured through reflexivity about researcher positionality, triangulation, and actively searching for data that contradicted emerging themes ("negative case analysis").

Ethical considerations in secondary analysis included securing proper permissions for copyrighted material, rigorous citation to avoid plagiarism, and sensitive handling of data concerning vulnerable populations (e.g., survivors of violence), ensuring representations were neither sensationalized nor trivialized.

3.5 Researcher Positionality and Limitations

The research team comprises Pakistani Muslim scholars with backgrounds in sociology and Islamic studies. This insider status facilitated deep cultural and linguistic understanding but required vigilant reflexivity to prevent bias. Reflexive journals and peer debriefing were used to critically examine how our positions might shape analysis.

***3.6* Limitations** of the methodology are acknowledged. Secondary analysis involves interpretation at a remove from original fieldwork contexts. Representation gaps exist in the source literature, particularly regarding Balochistan, tribal areas, transgender persons, and some religious minorities. The dominance of English-language publications may marginalize perspectives published in Urdu or regional languages. Despite these limitations, the methodology enables a unique synthesis and theoretical contribution that can inform both scholarship and practice.

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4. Findings

4.1 Lived Experiences of Discrimination: Navigation, Paradox, and Emotional Labor

The analysis reveals that women experience gender discrimination not as a monolithic force but as a daily, active navigation of contradictory expectations and constraints. A central theme is the experience of paradoxical inclusion-exclusion across different life domains. Educated, professional women in urban centers vividly described this duality. They are encouraged and celebrated for academic and career success, yet simultaneously subjected to intense pressure to prioritize domestic responsibilities and conform to traditional norms of femininity. As one corporate executive articulated in an interview study, "At work, I'm expected to be assertive, strategic, competitive—all traditionally masculine traits. But at home, I'm supposed to be nurturing, accommodating, self-sacrificing. I feel like I'm constantly switching between incompatible selves" (Khan, 2020, p. 145). This paradox manifests differently across class lines. Upper-class women described "gilded cages" of material privilege combined with extreme restrictions on personal autonomy, while working-class women narrated how economic necessity pushed them into public spheres where their presence remained culturally stigmatized.

In rural contexts, the paradox often revolves around economic participation. Multiple studies documented that women's labor in agriculture—sowing, weeding, harvesting, livestock care—is economically indispensable but socially invisible and systematically devalued. As a farmer's wife explained in a participatory research report, "We work from before sunrise to after sunset in the fields, but when the crop is sold, the money goes to my husband. My labor feeds the family, but I have no say in how the money is spent" (Aurat Foundation, 2021, p. 23). This creates a frustrating dynamic of being structurally included in the economy while being excluded from control over its fruits and decision-making authority.

In response to these paradoxes, women across diverse contexts develop sophisticated, context-specific navigation strategies. These are not merely coping mechanisms but forms of everyday resistance and tactical agency:

1. **Strategic Compliance:** Ostensibly conforming to gender norms while pursuing personal goals. For example, women may frame pursuit of higher education or a

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job as a means to contribute to family welfare, thereby making ambition socially palatable.

2. **Negotiated Exceptions:** Bargaining for exemptions from restrictive norms in specific instances. A common example is securing permission for university attendance or employment by agreeing to conditions like observing *purdah* or using chaperoned transportation.
3. **Alliance Building:** Cultivating strategic support from male family members—fathers, brothers, or husbands—who are more sympathetic to women's aspirations. Life histories frequently highlighted how a supportive male relative could be a crucial enabler within an otherwise restrictive family structure.
4. **Discursive Reframing:** Reinterpreting religious or cultural norms in more egalitarian directions. Educated women, in particular, described using Islamic arguments about the pursuit of knowledge or examples of independent women in early Islamic history to justify their choices.
5. **Community Creation:** Building informal networks with other women facing similar constraints. These networks provide emotional support, practical assistance (e.g., childcare swaps), and collective leverage for negotiating with families or communities.

The effectiveness of these strategies is highly contingent on social location. Urban, educated women typically possess more resources (economic, social, cultural) for effective navigation than rural women with limited formal education and mobility. However, even in highly restrictive environments, the data showed remarkable creativity in carving out small spaces for agency.

This constant navigation entails profound emotional labor. Women described the exhausting work of managing others' expectations, suppressing anger and frustration, performing appropriate femininity, and maintaining family harmony despite personal sacrifice. This labor has significant mental health consequences, with participants across studies reporting high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression linked to gender-role conflict. The burden is especially heavy for pioneers—first-generation educated women or those in non-traditional fields—who feel they bear the representational weight of their entire gender. As a first-generation female doctor stated, "Every success is also a burden. If I make a mistake,

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it's not just my failure—it's proof that women shouldn't be doctors" (Haque, 2022, p. 89).

4.2 The Religion-Culture Nexus: Selective Interpretation, Conflation, and Strategic Deployment

The analysis reveals a complex, non-deterministic relationship between Islamic teachings and gender norms, characterized by selective interpretation, strategic deployment, and the frequent conflation of culture with religion.

A key finding is selective interpretation of religious texts. Participants across studies described how specific Quranic verses and hadith are emphasized or minimized to legitimize existing gender arrangements. Verses highlighting equity and reciprocity (e.g., Quran 2:228, 33:35) are often marginalized in everyday religious discourse, while those open to hierarchical reading, particularly Quran 4:34 concerning male guardianship (*qiwamah*), receive disproportionate attention. This selectivity is not merely top-down from religious elites; it is reproduced in family and community settings where religious language is invoked to justify restrictions on women's mobility, education, and autonomy.

Simultaneously, the data reveals counter-trends of alternative interpretation, especially among educated women and Islamic feminist activists. These actors actively seek out and propagate egalitarian readings of Islamic texts to challenge restrictive practices. A women's rights activist explained this strategic hermeneutics: "When they quote Quran 4:34 to say men are in charge, I quote Quran 9:71 which says believing men and women are allies (*awliya*) of one another. The Quran has many voices on gender—which ones we emphasize is a choice" (Zia, 2021, p. 156). This represents a form of religious agency that contests patriarchal religious authority from within the Islamic tradition.

A pervasive mechanism identified is the conflation of cultural practices with religious mandates. Numerous practices with no foundation in Islamic primary texts—such as *vani* (swara), forced marriage, denial of inheritance rights, and extreme forms of honor-based violence—are routinely justified as "Islamic" requirements. This conflation operates through several channels:

- *Religious Sanctioning of Customs:* Local religious leaders (*imams*, *maulvis*) often

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provide religious justifications (*fatwas*, sermons) for prevailing cultural norms, thereby transmuting custom into perceived religious obligation.

- *Selective Religious Education:* Informal and formal religious instruction frequently emphasizes interpretations that align with local patriarchal culture, while neglecting alternative, justice-oriented perspectives.
- *Everyday Discursive Merging:* In family and community discussions, religious terminology is seamlessly used to enforce norms that are cultural in origin, making them appear divinely ordained.

This conflation is particularly potent in rural and tribal areas where customary law (*riwaj*, *jirga* rulings) holds substantial authority. Here, religious arguments are strategically deployed to defend traditional gender arrangements against the encroachment of state law or modernist values.

The analysis also highlights the strategic deployment of religious arguments in everyday gender negotiations. Both women and men use religious language instrumentally to support their positions. A father advocating for his daughter's education might cite the Prophet's saying "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim," while one opposing it might reference hadith emphasizing women's primary role in the home. This leads to "religious bargaining" where competing interpretations are weighed, and pragmatic compromises are reached. Religion thus emerges not as a fixed blueprint but as a fluid discursive resource mobilized in power negotiations.

Regional Variations in this religion-culture intersection are significant. In Punjab and Sindh, where Sufi traditions and folk Islam are influential, religious discourse sometimes accommodates more flexible gender norms, including greater female participation in shrine culture. In contrast, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and tribal agencies, *Pashtunwali* (the tribal code emphasizing honor, revenge, and hospitality) frequently supersedes Islamic principles in regulating women's lives, enforcing purdah and mobility restrictions that are tribal rather than purely religious. In Balochistan, similarly, tribal traditions dominate. These variations dismantle any singular narrative of "Islamic" gender norms in Pakistan, illustrating instead how local culture, specific religious interpretations, state presence, and global influences interact to produce diverse gender regimes.

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4.3 Mechanisms Sustaining Discrimination: Structural, Discursive, and Interactional Layers

The study identifies three interconnected sets of mechanisms that collectively sustain gender discrimination, explaining its resilience despite legal and policy advancements.

1. Structural Mechanisms: These are embedded in institutional arrangements, economic systems, and organizational practices that systematically disadvantage women.

- *Segmented Labor Markets:* The economy remains highly gendered, with women concentrated in lower-paying, informal, or "feminized" sectors (e.g., teaching, healthcare, domestic work) with limited upward mobility. This segregation stems not just from individual bias but from structural features: lack of affordable childcare, unsafe public transport, and workplace cultures hostile to women.
- *Institutionalized Implementation Gaps:* Progressive laws (e.g., against domestic violence, harassment, honor killing) face systematic failure in implementation. Police stations lack women's help desks or gender-sensitive protocols; courts have massive backlogs for gender-based violence cases; and agencies like the National Commission on the Status of Women have advisory powers without enforcement authority.
- *Biased Resource Allocation:* State and private resources are often allocated in ways that disadvantage women. Examples include lower per-student funding for girls' schools in some regions, agricultural extension services that exclusively target male "heads of household," and urban planning that neglects women's need for safe public spaces and transportation.
- *Political Exclusion Mechanisms:* Despite constitutionally mandated quotas, women politicians face barriers to meaningful power: they are often given symbolic rather than substantive party tickets, face harassment and character assassination, and are sidelined in key decision-making forums within political parties and assemblies.

2. Discursive Mechanisms: These operate through language, media, education, and everyday talk to naturalize and legitimize gender inequality.

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- *Naturalization Discourses:* Gender disparities are frequently framed as the natural, inevitable outcome of biological differences or divine will ("God made men and women different"), rendering them beyond question or human intervention.
- *Honor-Shame Frameworks:* Women's bodies and behaviors are relentlessly framed in terms of family (*izzat*) and community honor. Restrictions on mobility, education, and employment are thus justified not as oppression but as necessary protection of this collective honor, individualizing structural control.
- *Selective Religious Narratives:* As detailed earlier, patriarchal interpretations of religious texts are circulated as the only authentic ones, providing a powerful source of legitimacy for discriminatory practices.
- *Stereotypical Media Representations:* Analysis of television dramas, advertisements, and news media shows persistent patterns: women are disproportionately shown in domestic roles, as victims rather than agents, and in relation to men (as daughters, wives, mothers) rather than as autonomous individuals.
- *Gendered Educational Content:* School textbooks and curricula continue to propagate traditional roles, depicting women primarily in domestic settings and men in diverse professions, thereby socializing children into unequal gender norms from an early age.

3. Interactional Mechanisms: These are the everyday, face-to-face practices through which discrimination is reproduced in social interactions.

- *Micro-inequities:* Women described countless small acts of disrespect—being interrupted in meetings, having ideas credited to male colleagues, facing dismissive body language—that cumulatively create a hostile environment and hinder professional and social advancement.
- *Gatekeeping Practices:* In workplaces, universities, and other institutions, gatekeepers (often men) apply subtly different standards, requiring women to demonstrate higher competence for the same opportunities while offering them less mentorship and sponsorship.
- *Social Sanctioning:* Women who deviate from gender norms face a spectrum of sanctions, from gossip and ridicule to social ostracism and threats to family honor. This informal social policing is a powerful enforcer of conformity.

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- *Bargaining in the Shadow of Patriarchy:* Gender negotiations within households (over resources, mobility, life choices) often occur within parameters set by patriarchal norms, limiting the scope of possible outcomes. Women make calculated trade-offs, accepting certain restrictions to gain other freedoms.

These three sets of mechanisms are not separate; they reinforce each other. Discursive naturalization makes structural inequalities seem fair. Interactional micro-inequities make participation in public spheres psychologically costly, reinforcing structural barriers. Critically, all mechanisms operate with **intersectional variation**. An upper-class urban woman might primarily face subtle interactional and discursive barriers, while a poor rural woman confronts overwhelming structural obstacles compounded by explicit discursive justification of her subordination. A religious minority woman experiences all three mechanisms intensified by her religious marginalization. This intersectionality demands that strategies for change be tailored and multi-pronged.

5. Discussion: Toward an Integrated Theoretical Framework

The findings culminate in a grounded theory that explains the persistence of gender discrimination in Pakistan through three core, interrelated social processes: Navigated Agency, Contested Legitimacy, and Layered Implementation. This framework integrates the empirical findings and provides a holistic lens for understanding the dynamics of gender inequality.

5.1 Navigated Agency: Structure and Agency in Praxis

The concept of Navigated Agency captures the dynamic interplay between structural constraint and individual/collective action. It moves beyond binaries that pit passive victims against fully autonomous agents. The findings show women as active navigators who employ sophisticated strategies (compliance, negotiation, reframing, alliance-building) to steer through patriarchal constraints. This agency is real and consequential—it allows women to secure education, livelihoods, and spaces of autonomy. However, it is also bounded and often costly, requiring emotional labor and strategic compromises that may advance individual interests without fundamentally transforming the underlying structures. Navigated agency helps explain a paradox of contemporary Pakistan: significant increases in female education and some employment coexist with the resilience of core patriarchal

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norms. Individual women "navigate" their way to personal advancement, but the rules of the terrain—the structures and discourses—remain largely unchanged, requiring each new generation to undertake similar laborious navigation.

5.2 Contested Legitimacy: The Battleground of Normative Justification Contested Legitimacy refers to the ongoing struggle over the normative foundations of gender relations. Gender norms are not static; their authority is continually produced and challenged through appeals to different legitimizing frameworks. The findings reveal a vibrant contest between:

- *Religious-Traditionalist Legitimacy:* Drawing on selective interpretations of Islam and appeals to cultural authenticity.
- *Legal-Modernist Legitimacy:* Grounded in constitutional rights, international human rights law, and principles of secular citizenship.
- *Pragmatic-Economic Legitimacy:* Justifying women's roles based on economic necessity or developmental benefits.

This contestation happens in parliament, media, mosques, courts, and family living rooms. The persistent attribution gap—conflating culture with religion—is a key tactic within this contest, used to shield patriarchal practices from critique by giving them the aura of divine sanction. Recognizing gender relations as a field of contested legitimacy is empowering; it means that patriarchal norms are not hegemonic monoliths but are constantly having their authority questioned and renegotiated. It creates openings for promoting alternative, egalitarian sources of legitimacy, particularly within religious discourse itself via Islamic feminist hermeneutics.

5.3 Layered Implementation: The Chasm Between Law and Life Layered Implementation explains the chronic gap between progressive gender legislation and persistent discrimination. Policy implementation is not a simple, linear execution but a multi-layered process where formal policy is interpreted, translated, and often subverted at each stage:

1. *The Legislative Layer:* Formal laws and policies.
2. *The Bureaucratic/Institutional Layer:* Ministerial directives, organizational cultures, and resource allocations within implementing agencies (police, judiciary, local government).

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3. *The Street-Level Layer:* The beliefs, attitudes, and discretionary practices of frontline implementers (police officers, judges, clerks, social workers).
4. *The Societal/Community Layer:* The informal norms, power structures, and customary laws of families and communities where the policy is meant to take effect.

Disconnects and resistances at any layer can derail the policy. A law criminalizing domestic violence may exist at Layer 1, but fail at Layer 2 due to inadequate police training budgets, at Layer 3 due to officers who consider it a "private family matter," and at Layer 4 due to community pressure on the survivor to withdraw the case. This layered model moves the analysis beyond blaming "lack of political will" to pinpoint specific points of failure within the implementation chain, enabling more targeted and effective policy interventions.

5.4 Theoretical Synthesis and Contributions

This integrated framework—linking the micro (navigated agency), the normative (contested legitimacy), and the institutional (layered implementation)—makes several contributions. It bridges the agency-structure divide in social theory, showing how each constitutes the other. It enriches institutional theory by highlighting how informal norms and everyday practices mediate formal rules. It advances the study of religion and gender by conceptualizing religious tradition as a field of strategic interpretation rather than a set of fixed rules. Finally, it provides a comprehensive explanatory model for policymakers and activists, identifying multiple, interconnected leverage points for intervention.

6. Conclusion and Policy Imperatives

6.1 Summary of Key Insights

This qualitative study, through its analysis of secondary data (2018-2023), has developed a nuanced, grounded understanding of gender discrimination in Pakistan. Key insights include:

1. Women's experiences are characterized by paradoxical inclusion-exclusion and active navigation, involving significant emotional labor and strategic agency within constraints.
2. The relationship between Islam and gender norms is defined by selective interpretation, strategic deployment, and the conflation of culture with religion,

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making religious discourse a key terrain of contestation rather than a monolithic determinant.

3. Discrimination is sustained through an interlocking system of structural, discursive, and interactional mechanisms that vary intersectionally across class, ethnicity, region, and religion.
4. The failure of progressive laws is best explained by layered implementation, where policies are diluted or subverted at bureaucratic, street-level, and community layers.

The synthesized theoretical framework of Navigated Agency, Contested Legitimacy, and Layered Implementation provides a holistic lens for understanding the production and persistence of gender inequality, moving analysis beyond simplistic explanations.

6.2 Directed Policy Recommendations

Effective intervention requires integrated strategies that simultaneously address the three core processes identified. Recommendations are targeted at specific stakeholders:

A. To Strengthen Implementation and Address Structural Mechanisms (Target: Government, Judiciary, Bureaucracy):

1. **Establish Independent Gender Implementation Audits:** Create statutory bodies attached to Parliament and Provincial Assemblies with powers to investigate implementation failures, summon officials, and recommend corrective action. Their reports should trigger mandatory governmental response.
2. **Mandate Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) at All Levels:** Move beyond symbolic GRB to make it legally binding for federal and provincial budgets. Allocate specific, tracked funds for gender-sensitive infrastructure (e.g., safe transport, women-only parks, childcare facilities in government offices and markets).
3. **Reform Frontline Institutions:** Overhaul police station and court procedures through binding protocols for gender-based violence cases. Establish performance metrics for police and judiciary (e.g., case registration rate, time to disposition) linked to promotions and funding.

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4. **Launch a National Action Plan on Women's Economic Participation:** This should explicitly tackle structural barriers: incentivize private sector provision of childcare through tax breaks, develop safe, women-focused public transport routes in major cities, and create a national database and support system for women entrepreneurs.

B. To Engage in the Contest of Legitimacy and Shift Discursive Mechanisms (Target: Religious Institutions, Media, Education Authorities, Civil Society):

1. **State-Supported Program for Gender-Just Religious Scholarship:** The Ministry of Religious Affairs, in partnership with universities and respected Islamic scholars, should fund and disseminate research, fatwas, and sermon guides (*khutba* packs) that present gender-egalitarian interpretations of Islamic texts. This material should be distributed to mosques and madrassas.
2. **Mandatory Curriculum Reform:** The Ministry of Education must commission and mandate the use of revised textbooks from primary to secondary level that eliminate gender stereotypes, depict women in diverse professional roles, and integrate modules on human rights, consent, and critical thinking about gender norms.
3. **Public Media Campaigns and Regulations:** Mandate broadcast quotas for programming that positively depicts women's agency and diversity. Support public service campaigns that disrupt honor-shame frameworks, redefining family "honor" as supporting women's rights and education.
4. **Support Alternative Media Voices:** Fund training and platforms for female journalists, religious scholars, and community activists to become public commentators, directly engaging in and shaping public discourse on gender.

C. To Support Navigated Agency and Counter Interactional Mechanisms (Target: Civil Society, Donors, Community Organizations):

1. **Scale Up Community-Based Paralegal and Support Networks:** Fund NGOs to establish paralegal centers in rural and peri-urban areas, staffed by local women trained to help others navigate legal systems (e.g., for NADRA registration, inheritance claims, violence complaints).
2. **Institutionalize Psychosocial Support:** Integrate mental health services and

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peer-support groups into existing community health centers and women's development centers, explicitly addressing the emotional labor and stress of navigating gender discrimination.

3. **Create Safe Digital and Physical Spaces:** Support the creation of women-only co-working spaces, professional networks, and vetted digital forums where women can share strategies, seek mentorship, and build collective power without fear of harassment.
4. **Document and Disseminate Navigation Strategies:** Commission and widely disseminate (via radio, social media, community theatre) case studies and guides showcasing successful navigation strategies used by women in different contexts, turning individual tacit knowledge into a communal resource.

6.3 Concluding Reflection

Confronting gender discrimination in Pakistan is a complex, long-term endeavor that requires moving beyond isolated projects to systemic, integrated transformation. It demands that all stakeholders—state, religious institutions, media, civil society, families, and men—engage concurrently. The path forward must honor the navigated agency of Pakistani women by removing structural barriers and providing support. It must actively participate in the contest of legitimacy by championing interpretations of religion and culture that affirm justice and equality. And it must diligently work to bridge the layered implementation gap, ensuring that the promise of law becomes the reality of life.

This is not merely a moral imperative for gender justice; it is an urgent economic and social necessity for Pakistan's stability, prosperity, and democratic future. By grounding policy and practice in the nuanced realities revealed by this research, transformative change becomes a tangible, achievable goal. The resilience and agency demonstrated by Pakistani women every day are the nation's greatest resource; the task is to build structures and norms that unleash this potential fully.

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