A Journey of a Thousand Miles:
A Step Toward a Pashtun Women's Movement in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Introduction

The women's movement in Pakistan has a rich history and remains vibrant in advocating women's rights and gender equality. It has undergone a challenging trajectory, responding to various social, political, and cultural realities. Its presence and progress vary across different provinces, depending primarily on the socio-political and cultural milieu. Credit goes to the persistent efforts of numerous women's groups operating in various parts of Pakistan and scholarly contributions that support and advance its cause (Saigol & Chaudhary 2020; Khan 2018; Weiss 2014; Jafar 2007). It is important to note that generally, the "women's movement" refers to women's organised efforts for women's rights in the public domain; it is an overarching term reflecting historical and contemporary efforts to protect women's rights in the context of Pakistan.

From an academic perspective, the women's movement has been conceptualised in myriad ways. Taking cues from Dorothy E. McBride and Amy G. Mazur (2008), this paper uses the following conceptualisation: 'Women's movement refers to collective action by explicitly organised women presenting claims in public life with their gender identities as women' (226). Scholars have used the terms women's and feminist movements interchangeably (Shaheed 2010; Banaszak 2006; Mazur 2002; Chappell 2002; Bull et al. 2000). However, the term "feminist" carries a charged connotation, so many collective action actors try to avoid this label (McBride & Mazur 2008, 235; Charania

2021). Additionally, with more women participating in public life and representing women's interests, the women's movement has expanded and become mainstream. Thus, our preferred term for this paper is "women's movement".

In the context of Pakistan, a significant body of scholarship examines the women's movement and its struggle at the national level. However, the dilemma arises as there is limited literature available to ascertain the specific role of Pashtun women in advocating for women's rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). This paper examines whether any Pashtun women's movement exists in KP. If yes, we ask whether early to mid-career-educated women participate in the women's movement, and how they see the movement working for women's rights in KP. Educated women were often at the forefront of formally organising themselves, this is why we picked this sample.

The paper is structured into three sections: the first section provides a historical analysis of Pakistan's women's movement. The second section delves into the women's movement in KP, including the roles and associations of women within the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). The third section discusses findings from interviews with professional and educated Pashtun women concerning the existence, challenges, and outcomes of a Pashtun women's movement. Therefore, we aim to demonstrate the necessity for a robust and dynamic Pashtun women's movement to challenge the status quo and amplify the voices of marginalised and silenced women in KP. The paper investigates in how far the women's movement is seen as aligned with achieving transformative social change for women rather than upholding the status quo.

Historical trajectory of the women's movement in Pakistan

Women's collective action and political mobilisation presented an unprecedented struggle for independence in Pakistan (Khan 2018). Historically, women played a significant role in protecting their rights under British colonial rule through involvement in three major political movements. First, the educational reform movement; second, the Khilafat movement; and third, Pakistan's independence movement (Yaqoob & Hussain 2014; A. Ali 2000; Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987; Mathur 1973). After independence in 1947, no formal and separate women's movement existed; however, women's activities were organised by various women's organisations, and the leading one among them was the All-Pakistan-Women Association (APWA) (see Alam & Sanauddin 2021; Saigol 2016; Naz et al. 2013; S. Ali 2000; Zia 1996; Jalal 1991; Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987).

The participation of women in public life after Pakistan's independence was questioned by their male counterparts, using patriarchal and religious discourse. According to Rouse (1986), during that time, women were compelled to work in segregated environments to avoid harassment. According to male hegemonic accounts, segregation aimed to preserve women's morality and regulate their sexuality. Since then, as Fleschenberg (2010) puts it, women's rights have been a bargaining chip for various stakeholders (government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), ideological elements, and international actors) in Pakistan. Women's political and social training as active members of society before partition became a source of unease and a perceived threat to men in power. Various scholars note that the independence struggle provided an environment where 'Muslim women broke through traditional rules and restrictions, cast off their veils, left their homes, approached strangers, confronted police, and entered politics' (Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987, 47) to challenge the colonial regime (Jafar 2005).

After this brief interlude of increasing public and political participation, in the early years of Pakistan's existence, women's progressive voices were more suppressed with each passing year, constricting the spaces for women in public life. According to an analysis by Khan and Naqvi (2018), General Ayub Khan's military regime introduced the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO)[4] in 1962, which was seen as progressive. Simultaneously, he collaborated with religious scholars to propagate the notion that a woman could not hold the position of head of state, notably to disqualify his political rival, Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah (S. Ali 2000; Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987).

After the end of Ayub's martial law regime in 1969, the women's movement flourished and explored new horizons during the government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1971-79). The "Principles of Policy" section in the new 1973 constitution underwent amendments that guaranteed full participation of women in all aspects of national life, including previously inaccessible prestigious government services, thereby expanding employment opportunities for women. Bhutto's progressive regime was succeeded by the martial law rule of General Zia ul Haq, spanning from 1977 to 1988. His tenure was marked by the promulgation of the Hudood Ordinances[5] that aligned with his interpretation of Islamic regulations, notably imposing restrictions on women and confining them to the private sphere (Jafar 2005; Bari & Khattak 2001; Weiss 2001, 1999, 1998, 1993; Ali 2000; Burney 1999; Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987). Consequently, from a political standpoint, two national parliamentary terms went without female representation (Bano 2021).

Jafar (2005) argues that 'Zia turned to women as a tool and as a symbol of his transformation of Pakistan into the ideal Islamic state' (36). Similarly, Moghadam (1997) underscores that women are perceived to have a strong connection with culture and traditions, which was exploited during the Zia regime by signifying them as central to 'religious-cultural identity' (39). Syed (2021) discusses that, consequently, women's roles were reduced to the walls of their homes, using religion as a tool for social control, thereby severely limiting women's agency. Thus, Zia's Hudood Ordinances hindered women's social and political participation in the public realm. This is why the 1980s are often labelled as 'the darkest period for women's rights in the country's history' (Khan & Naqvi 2018, 10). As a result of oppressive government policies, a vibrant Pakistani women's movement emerged in the 1980s to counteract discrimination against women and to restore democracy. Several women's NGOs were established, and the Women Action Forum (WAF) spearheaded the movement—an organisation of educated and articulate women committed to restoring democracy and questioning the status quo (Khan 2019; Jilani 1986). After the end of the Zia ul Haq regime in 1988, WAF was divided into city-based chapters with different activities and momentum, depending upon the people organising those activities (Khan 2020).

The 1990s saw governments led by Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto; Pakistani feminist writer Rubina Saigol (2016) describes this decade as a 'merry-go-round' of political parties. The ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996 was a milestone for women's rights in this decade (Saigol 2016; Naz et al. 2013; Ali 2012; Jafar 2005; Laumann 2000; Weiss 1994; Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987). However, the fractured path of democracy did not significantly contribute to the promotion of women's rights until the 2000s. In the recent past, several pro-women legislations, such as Criminal Law Amendment Acts regarding honour crimes (2016), sexual harassment at the workplace (2013), or acid control and acid crime prevention (2011), were passed, and the Women in Distress and Detention Fund (2011) and National and Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women were set up via legal regulations (Zia 2014; Mirza 2011).

Despite these positive changes in the legal sphere, the Islamic ideology inculcated by Zia is carried forward persistently in one form or another, and especially after the proliferation of NGOs that seek to work on women's issues (Batool 2020; Jafar 2007; Moghadam 1997). As noted by Khan and Kirmani (2018), the women's movement and

feminism in the post-Zia era were subjected to contestation and debate, primarily due to a binary framework still carried forward in the available scholarship. This binary discourse often focused on Westernised, secular feminists on the one hand and pious and modest Muslim women on the other hand. Khan (2001) also argues that the state played a crucial role in propagating the notion that feminist activities were foreign-funded (i.e. there was an ulterior foreign agenda of inculcating and propagating secular values in society) and, thus, against Islamic values.

Interestingly, a favourable narrative emerged when donor agencies began funding faith-based organisations in Pakistan. Since faith-based organisations have always resisted foreign funding, this new approach aimed to minimise the government's opposition and gain greater community acceptance for their initiatives. For instance, Brohi and Zaman (2016) recount that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) sponsored several projects to sensitise religious leaders to endorse using contraceptives to control population growth and to gain approval for a family planning manual from the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII).

Hence, the state, international organisations and national civil society are foundational in characterising the women's movement in Pakistan. For years, progressive and liberal feminists defined and discussed the women's movement to call out the discriminatory and anti-women policies during and after the Zia regime (see Saigol 2016; Shaheed et al. 1998; Khan et al. 1994; Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987). This scholarship generated substantive criticism for feminism, and its advocates, accusing those active in the movement of leading women towards liberation and emancipation—and by extension Westernisation, which is alleged to undermine the traditional values of society. In contrast, scholarship focusing on more conservative women's organisations also emerged after the 2000s (Jamal 2013; Iqtidar 2011; Mushtaq 2010; Ahmad 2010), primarily delving into topics such as women's involve-ment in religious parties and piety movements, exemplified by Al-Huda (Hussain 2014; Mushtaq 2010). The inclusion of religious parties and piety movements altered the course of action of the women's movement in Pakistan. However, the discussion on Islamic feminism and piety movements is outside the purview of this paper.

Recently, to question the repressive socio-cultural context, a solid reactionary version of the Pakistani women's movement emerged in the form of the *Aurat March* (women's march)*,* celebrating International Women's Day in Pakistan since 2018. The Aurat March's charter of demands include, domestic violence, protection against harassment at the workplace, maternity leaves, daycare facilities, inclusion of women

with disabilities, and protection of transgender and labour rights. Dossa (2021) highlights that the Aurat March signifies intersectional, interfaith, and intergenerational feminism, building upon the groundwork laid by existing women's movements in Pakistan. The critics of the Aurat March argue that it boldly addresses sexual autonomy and agency, sparking discussions and breaking the silence primarily due to shifts across generations (Rehman 2019). Such topics have remained taboos in Pakistani popular discourses; hence, Aurat March has invited much criticism from conservatives for its allegedly Westernised slogans and demands (Batool & Malik 2021).

Women's movement in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: An illusion or a reality?

Even though the women's movement has remained a formidable reality, it is hard to say to what extent it transcends Pakistan's regional and centre-periphery divisions. The centre and urbanised parts of Pakistan were the focus of the national women's movement's struggle and created spaces for contestation and mobilisation. The context of Pashtun society differed from other peripheral regions because of the strength of the leading political parties, for instance, Awami National Party (ANP), Jamiat Ulema e Islam (JUI), Jamaat-i Islami (JI) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Except for ANP, all others hold conservative stances on women's rights. Religious political parties are notably more potent in driving policymaking in KP, partly because the state promoted religiosity and religious political parties to achieve its regional strategic goals in Afghanistan (Khan 2014; Shah 2012; Shah 1998).

ANP is a leftist, secular political party that supports women's representation and emancipation theoretically. According to the 2018 manifesto of ANP, women's rights and empowerment were vital features. In contrast, JUI and JI are right-wing religious political parties holding conservative women's rights positions and have objected to several pro-women legislations, among others, the Domestic Violence Bill (2021), calling them un-Islamic. The religious parties' manifestos do not address women's issues specifically; instead, they talk about curbing social evils at a general level due to patriarchal structures embedded in the Pashtun cultural code and customary practices. Besides, religious extremism has changed the entire political and social scenario in KP after 9/11 (Khan & Kirmani 2018). Jafar (2005) highlights that 'the women's movement in KP, once again faces the old enemy – politically powerful religious fundamentalists' (53).

The pace, demands, and manifestation of women's activism and struggle in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa vary considerably

compared to other provinces. Naseer (2022) discusses that KP is marked by 'Talibanization, militancy, and the dominations of religious political parties, resulting in low involvement of women in public life' (67). However, a few voluntary, informal groups and networks, such as *Takrha Qabailee Khwendy* (TQK) (brave tribal women), *Khor* (sister), *Jamni Aurtein* (purple women), and Feminist Friday, were established by women's NGOs. The involvement of women in these small, context-specific women's rights initiatives was more symbolic than active because they lacked genuine consideration of women's concerns in deciding how they wanted to improve their status in society. Also, the dilemma with these networks was that they were short-lived because their survival depended on NGOs. The work of NGOs is generally criticised in KP, and women's NGOs were mainly targeted because of religious fundamentalism (Alam & Sanauddin 2021; Jafar 2007). Thus, the women's movement has existed in name but has lacked rigour and meaningful impact due to cultural constraints.

One of the peripheral ethnic identity movements is the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), which has primarily mobilised urban, middle-class men and women to demand protection against human rights abuses committed during military operations in the Pashtun region. PTM also aims to end forced disappearances, ensure free and fair trials for those affected in the courts, remove the curfew in South Waziristan, and stop the humiliation of Pashtun families at security checkpoints (Jafri 2021, 6). The role of women in PTM is discussed by Yousaf (2021), he argues that women in the province of KP and Balochistan are largely excluded from political movements nonetheless, 'PTM has provided a platform to young women taking part in the movement's rallies and political activities' (95). Besides Pashtun culture, two patriarchal institu-tions within Pakistan's context influence women's identity: religion and the state (Khan & Kirmani 2018). The recent activities of PTM present an alternative picture where educated women actively participate, and these developments raise the question of whether Pashtun women are using this opportunity to stand in for their rights as "Pashtun women" or whether the activism is only confined to an overall Pashtun identity.

As evident from the preceding discussion, the women's movement in Pakistan, specifically in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is diverse and heterogeneous, lacking one comprehensive explanation. None-theless, its central aim is to organise women around a common cause and engage in collective action to achieve its goals. In the scholarship, the women's movement is seen as one factor that plays a critical role in democratisation (Baldez 2002; Bano 2021). Boldt and White (2011, 29) also note that the women's movement organises and mobilises women's

interests across diverse political contexts. As for repertoires of action, the women's movement makes alliances with progressive elements ranging from civil society and the media to left-wing political parties representing women's issues and interests (Bano 2021).

Additionally, social movement scholarship posits that women's identities are crucial in mustering up for collective action (Baldez 2002; Waylen 1992). Waylen (1992, 301) holds that collective identity and collective action frames have often empowered women who were victims of repression to organise, mobilise, and act. More specifically, women's movements engage in political action (in democratic regimes) to achieve women's political and economic rights (Boldt & White 2011, 30). There-fore, we observe and assume there is some activism concerning women's issues in KP. Hence, collectively, we regard these activities as part of the movement. However, determining whether these activities contribute to and constitute an organised and unified Pashtun women's movement requires deliberation from its adherents and their association with it.

Study design

This paper adopts qualitative approaches to examine the affiliation of early to mid-career professional Pashtun women with the Pashtun women's movement in the province of KP. We used the in-depth interview (IDI) method for data collection and substantiated the data with the observation method. Observation is a qualitative research method that relies on systematically and meaningfully seeing and hearing for data collection (McKechnie 2008, 573; Smit & Onwuegbuzie 2018).

A total of 15 educated working women, holding MS and PhD qualifications and falling within the age range of 35-45, working in various sectors were selected from KP through convenience sampling. The study sample included various professions such as university professors, civil society members, members of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women (KPCSW), former members of the KP provincial assembly, and media professionals. The research participants were carefully selected based on their length of service and experience in their respective fields. The data was collected from May to July 2023. IDIs enabled the researchers to record the perceptions of the women interviewees through a meaningful conversation. Both verbal and non-verbal communications were meticulously collected to provide a comprehensive and unbiased qualitative account. As per Patten and Newhart (2018), this approach allows the researcher to ask predeter-mined and additional questions for further clarification.

After transcription and translation (interviews were taken in the local language, Pashto), the empirical data was arranged into themes to identify patterns and eliminate redundancy. Coding helped to subdivide the raw data; in a subsequent step, the extracted codes were clustered. Thematic categorisation, including sub-categories, was developed to present the empirical data systematically and rigorously. According to Mason (2002), analysing qualitative data is a rigorous academic activity that requires sound 'intellectual and strategic thinking' (14) to execute qualitative data analysis. In qualitative research, it is crucial to consciously preserve the participants' perspectives, such as the meanings they associate with concepts, their significance to emotions in their social life, and their overall social experiences. Therefore, thematic analysis and verbatim comments are incorporated into the presentation of the findings to capture nuances in the participants' perspectives regarding the Pashtun women's movement in KP.

Themes and analysis

The study's findings show various aspects of the women's movement from the perspective of women. The study focused on women's perception of its existence, activism within the movement, its relationship with PTM, its outcomes, its challenges, and the backlash the women's rights struggle encountered. The study participants expressed diverse opinions regarding the topic; however, the majority appeared uninformed rather than critically analysing the manifestation and prevalence of women's rights struggle in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the following sections, we elaborate on some themes from the interview data.

A women's movement or a Pashtun women's movement?

Women's and Pashtun movements were often treated as synonymous terms and used interchangeably by most participants. Opinions vary from superficial and common-sense knowledge to a more formal conceptual understanding. The women's thoughts can be grouped into three distinctive categories. Firstly, some participants believed there was no women's movement in KP. Secondly, a few participants thought that any initiative aimed at improving the situation of Pashtun women, when carried out in a Pashtun local context, constituted a Pashtun women's movement. Also, some participants disapproved of such activities and labelled them non-Pashtun; their judgment is based on the principles outlined in Pashtunwali.[6] Thirdly, some participants were aware and conscious of a women's movement and could differentiate between the distinctive nature of the Pashtun women's movement.

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Starting with the first theme, one of the early career university teachers who did not acknowledge the Pashtun women's movement's presence stated:

> There is no Pashtun women's movement because it would question culture and norms if we had one. Maybe it exists, but it is scattered and not unified; maybe NGOs are doing something, but it lacks momentum; perhaps I do not know about it, or it does not exist. (Interview A)

The above statement highlights the perplexed mind of the participant who, after giving the disclaimer about what a women's movements should constitute, expressed her ignorance about it. A participant who served as a member of parliament in the provincial assembly said:

> There is no movement as such; maybe at the government level, the KP Commission on the Status of Women or Ombudsperson is doing something to make it visible. I have worked with a women's parliamentarian caucus; they are also doing some work, but I am unsure if it is a women's movement. (Interview G)

Another research participant, who is a Pashto poetess and faculty member at a university, stated:

> I do not know anything about it, if it exists or not. I have never heard of it; it is my first time being asked such questions. How are other (uneducated) women aware of it? My poetry talks about women's suppression in a male-dominated Pashtun society, but I know nothing about the women's movement. (Interview C)

The above statements highlight the lack of awareness among many Pashtun women regarding the women's movement in KP. However, the intriguing fact is that most of these participants were involved in carrying out women-centred initiatives and possessed a profound consciousness related to women's issues. They were completely unaware and disconnected from the women's movement in KP and their potential participation in such a movement.

However, an entirely different scenario was sketched by a few participants who differentiated between the women's movement and the Pashtun women's movement, the second theme. They emphatically advocated for an independent women's movement in KP to safeguard women's rights among Pashtuns. For instance, as one interviewee explains:

> Before independence, Pashtun women participated in the Khudai Kidmatgar movement, but it did not strive for feminist concerns; instead, it was the acquisition of basic welfare-oriented needs. After independence, progressive socialist and communist groups

set up organisations like the Democratic Women's Association, a women's democratic front. They started discussing bold issues like sexual and reproductive health, violence and discriminatory practices during the Women's Day celebration. (Interview B)

The above statement historically explains the progression of the women's movement that moved from issues such as welfare to feminism, but these activities were limited in scope. The dominance of Pashtun culture, poverty and the dependent status of women on men did not enable women to change their status in society, as one participant explained:

We need to have a distinct women's movement because when a woman asserts her rightful demands, she is often instilled with fear by male family members using the rationale of Pashtun culture and traditions. If she stays firm on her rights, she is threatened with stopping to ask for them. From a structural standpoint, all women, regardless of education, face similar challenges; however, being educated enables me to navigate specific issues that an un-educated woman might not even think of addressing. (Interview A)

However, those who recognised the importance of the women's move-ment asserted that an active women's struggle was necessary. A participant shared that:

Takrha Qabailee Khwendy (TQK) is the only Pashtun women's movement. I firmly observe that women from the former FATA are active everywhere, such as in advocacy, the legal sphere, and academia. In ANP, for example, they do not have a separate women's wing (as the rest of the parties have) because they claim that women are mainstreamed in their line of work. Women's movement is also political, but it is not like a political party to address its concerns at all levels. (Interview E)

According to Alam and Sanauddin (2021), two indigenous organisations, TQK and Khor, are initiatives of the women's NGO *Khewendo Kor* (literally sister's house in Pashto). These women's groups are informal structures to mainstream tribal women by highlighting their genuine concerns. Both groups are striving to bring them into development discourse through capacity-building programmes.

According to Beckwith (2000) women's movement is 'characterized by the primacy of women's gendered experiences, women's issues, and women's leadership and decision making' (437). Highlighting this definition, the study findings suggest that opinions may vary regarding the existence of women's and Pashtun women's movements in the region. However, it becomes clear that the interviewees are united in their view that a Pashtun woman advocating for women's rights should

possess the knowledge of the norms, traditions, conventions, and vulnerabilities associated with the gendered identity of women in Pashtun culture. These insights enable her to work dedicatedly rather than superficially for women's genuine needs and concerns.

Nature and form of activism in the Pashtun women's movement

It was crucial to understand the lens through which participants discussed and strategised the concept of activism in the women's movement. Women from academia perceived activism as involving writing, researching, and amplifying voices within their relevant spheres of influence. Women from civil society viewed activism as a forum and tool to create a pressure group to capture media attention in order to expedite problem resolution. Another group of participants highlighted the availability of feminist scholarship and literature (fiction and poetry) as an acknowledgement of the women's movement in Pashtun society. In other words, many women opined that a women's movement should be active and dynamic. However, forms of activism have evolved substantially. This becomes evident from the following statement:

> If we think of a movement that is organised and full of street activism, then there is no movement [in KP]. However, civil society organisations, mainly NGOs, run the women's movement in KP. Moreover, street activism is substantially replaced with social media activism and movement. Many young Pashtun girls are running successful social media pages and generating a debate about women's rights with and without an official NGO affiliation. (Interview F)

Another research participant expressed her point of view as follows:

> We cannot think about active street movements, particularly in the context of KP. The only example of a conceptual form of a movement is Aurat March, but again, compared to other provinces and cities, women of KP have token representation. On an international day, a few female NGO representatives show their placards in front of the press club with no apparent demands compared to other cities. So, in this scenario, I cannot entirely agree with the existence of the women's movement in KP. (Interview E)

The above statements demonstrate that many study participants envisioned the women's movement as a large gathering of women chanting slogans, displaying placards and aiming for political mobilisation. However, it is essential to recognise that this perspective may not always hold regarding Pashtun women's movement. Activism and protest take on many forms, and every form may not necessarily involve street activism.

Batool and Malik (2021) highlight that the women's movement in Pakistan has encountered severe backlash from right-wing political parties following the Zia era. This opposition persisted through contemporary debates surrounding women's rights, such as the Aurat March, which showcases pronounced street activism. Nevertheless, in the West, as Walby (2011) noted, new forms of feminism are indiscernible to those who look at social movements from the lens of traditional repertoires of action. A movement can encompass gradual and evolving ideas and strategies, for instance, a gathering that challenges the established norms, a small group of individuals dedicated to preserving a cause, or even an inconspicuous office space struggling for its existence.

Since the women's movement is a reformative movement aiming at social change, it is bound to be gradual and strategic and engage various tactics ranging from the pen to street activism (Beckwith 2000). However, the findings show that considerable activism exists by NGOs, women's groups, and organisations for women's rights in KP; yet, many educated and professional women do not see them as part of the larger Pashtun women's movement. Instead, it was unclear to many study participants that a Pashtun women's movement could exist in KP.

Pashtun Tahafuz Movement and its relationship with the women's movement

In this context, it is pertinent to explore how women see the participation of women in a cause that is already largely seen as a social movement, the PTM. Most of the participants believed that PTM is their sole hope, and their Pashtun ethnic identity requires them to have affiliation with PTM due to its ideological stance in support of Pashtuns. These participants mainly believed in women's empowerment but did not identify themselves as part of the women's movement for many reasons, including unawareness. Some participants expressed sentimentality towards PTM due to their involvement in its women's wing and its contextual relevance, contrasting it with the women's movement in Pakistan and other countries.

PTM represents the voice of Pashtun tribal society and poses a pivotal question within the purview of this paper: whether it genuinely embraces women's concerns or exploits their presence and participation to further its interests. There is no agreement among the participants regarding PTM as a Pashtun women's movement. An activist participant saw women's issues addressed by PTM:

> PTM has a strong gender identity; mothers and the young wives of missing persons participated, and women's involvement in steering committees and public speeches on the stage created a space for

women's voices and visibility to address their genuine concerns. Women like Sana Ijaz, Jamila Gillani, and Gulalai Ismail were at the forefront. (Interview B)

A contrasting opinion was voiced by a female academic and researcher:

Lately, I have joined PTM, but women's rights are secondary in PTM because they have larger goals….80-85 per cent of people have been educated through PTM demands and its goals. The initial step is to nourish the province; after that, every aspect/concern/gender will be provisioned automatically. (Interview A)

However, a few participants showed reluctance to accept PTM as specifically working on women's rights in Pashtun society. One of them conveyed her disappointment:

I have no hopes for PTM to highlight women's cause; they have not done anything so far. A few former political party members joined it but are not visible anymore. I think talking about women's empowerment has become a politically correct thing for anybody. There is nothing substantive about women in PTM; maybe it is my lack of knowledge. When there is an achievement, there is a back-lash and then a reaction of people; we have witnessed nothing like that. The media might have stopped giving them coverage lately because I have not seen any PTM visibility for the last six months. (Interview E)

The findings indicate that the interviewees saw PTM as a social movement representing the rights of Pashtun ethnic identity. It can be observed that many uneducated women who take part in PTM demand the recovery of missing persons who were their immediate male family members. In contrast, educated urban women (belonging to Newly Merged Districts (formerly known as FATA) and other areas) participated in the PTM to demonstrate solidarity and raise their voices on general regional issues. Jafri (2021) explains that 'the PTM engages women at various levels of the movement; women are leaders, activists, and supporters of the PTM' (11). Yousaf (2021) discusses that these women have faced serious backlash from state and state-owned institutions for showing their active affiliation with PTM.

However, the study findings show that some women thought that PTM failed to address women's concerns and lacked distinctly women-centric demands. A few participants argued that the mere presence of women in protests or demonstrations does not guarantee the fulfilment of their genuine needs; instead, they opined that a separate and dedicated struggle is required to ensure the specific demands of women.

Outcomes of the Pashtun women's movement

It becomes evident from the field data that a Pashtun women's movement in KP strives to attain specific outcomes, but participants had different opinions regarding what they are. Some asserted that the movement had achieved many outcomes, and others blatantly rejected the existence of the women's movement, remaining sceptical by expressing that no progress had been made. An intriguing aspect of the sceptical group was their critique of the shortcomings of all the women-centred initiatives. They argued that the outcomes of the women's movement should not merely focus on superficial representation, akin to the notion of "add women and stir". Instead, the emphasis should be on integrating women into the broader system. Additionally, they had reservations about government and non-government bodies undertaking women-focused initiatives. A participant who did not believe the women's movement had achieved any outcomes shared that:

> There is a disconnect between the urban and rural women's movement and the essential issues of women living in remote areas; they are still struggling to meet basic needs like health, education, access to fresh water, and inheritance rights. I do not know if the women's movement can solve their problems or government would do it, but it needs to be done. Being a Pashtun woman, I strongly feel that chanting slogans while standing on the roadside would not help women achieve their due rights. The use of mosques and religious preachers in a positive manner would make a difference. (Interview D)

Another participant from the same school of thought narrated that to give women political participation, the government of Pakistan introduced a quota system for their political representation. However, due to patriarchy, internal dynamics of political parties and the overall fabric of Pashtun society the quota system did not uplift the status of women in Pakistani society. She expressed that:

> Sometimes, the quota introduced for women must be increased because it does not achieve the purpose. Party politics only lets women do something if they are selected for reserved seats. In the bureaucracy, women's quota is just like a filler. (Interview D)

Echoing these study participants, Farid et al. (2023) highlight that political parties in power have selected women on reserved seats from their close relatives or influential families to retain their political support. These influential families had been in power previously or have the potential to be elected in the next elections. Taking the same argument further, a participant who favoured the women's movement and believed that it had achieved specific goals shared:

> I feel the tangible outcome of the women's movement would be securing women's inheritance rights with strict legislation… Inheritance makes your position strong in the family and society at large. Secondly, women's decision-making power about their lives and the number of children they reproduce is the second main aim after inheritance. Men should be sensitised enough to make decisions with their women. (Interview G)

A few participants expressed their opinions on the outcomes of the women's movement in the following words:

> The outcome of the women's movement is not confined to women's specific issues. However, it should be viewed more significantly because, as women, we have our perspective on any global issue. The women's movement has achieved a lot, both materially and non-materially. It challenged the status quo, publicised taboos, and implemented legislative reforms. Another critical aspect of any movement is that it should attract local and regional scholarship towards it, which, unfortunately, is not enough. However, women's movement and NGO publications should be credited for whatever is available. (Interview B)

These statements vividly demonstrate that the outcomes of Pashtun women's movements are multifaceted. They require efforts from women's rights activists to channel their energy towards improving women's status in Pashtun society. The difference of opinions among study participants was not because they are part of two confrontational groups; instead, it was mainly because many participants did not acknowledge the existence of the women's movement and what it seeks to achieve.

Feminism: A dilemma for educated women

In the context of KP, a Pashtun woman's primary identity is often defined by her cultural norms, which frequently portray her in relation to a man. Her identity as an individual always takes a secondary position. Therefore, her agency concerning her choices and preferences in both public and private domains is compromised. Whether educated or uneducated, when a Pashtun woman operates within these established identities, she is socially accepted and appreciated. However, deviation from established norms and forming her own ideological identity are not respected. Similarly, the study findings reveal that educated women hesitated to associate themselves with "feminism"—a discourse understood as inculcating Western societal values in women. Although feminism resonated with most participants, they lacked the confidence to call themselves "feminists" because the label is seen as synonymous with being "Western" (Charania 2021; Haeri 2002). A participant commented that the identity of a feminist carries a lot of negative connotations in Pashtun society, which is why women prefer not to use it. She said:

> Whenever I received an invite from a women's organisation to protest or any other activity involving media coverage, I felt fearful as a Pashtun woman because of my family and my area. Also, I have always been critical of their approach to addressing issues and thought they lacked sophistication in dealing with problems such as the Aurat March and the transgender movement. The bottom line is that it was my weakness, not a weakness at the movement level, because I refrained from becoming part of many things. (Interview F)

Women from different professional backgrounds hold the same opinion that they are hesitant about participating in "feminist" activities at the provincial level. A regional head of a leading women's NGO stated her concerns when she was asked to join in Aurat March events:

> I identify with all female-centric events, for instance, government or non-government projects to empower women and related legislation. Still, I cannot participate in activities as a Pashtun woman. I declined the involvement of my organisation to participate in the women's march event because, working at the grassroots, Pashtun women face an entirely different set of issues than other cities. (Interview H)

Apart from negative connotations related to feminism and feminist activities, women in Pakistan are not homogenous. Women in KP live in an environment that discourages educated women from participating in feminist activities. Active participation of women in the women's movement depends on the relevance of the demands and issues to the context in which they operate. If either aspect is missing—the significance of the problem itself or its applicability to the people involved—it leads to non-participation. As another participant explains:

> I believe Khor and TQK are genuine examples of the Pashtun women's movement because they exhibit a spark to gather for a cause and organise discussion forums. Unfortunately, I cannot resonate with their activities since the struggles of these tribal women do not align with my concerns due to differences in ground realities and context. Generally, all women share common issues, but it is not easy to identify with contextual-specific movements like in tribal areas. I strongly feel that even women living in Peshawar and working for tribal women have their distinct reality. (Interview E)

The study findings highlight that educated Pashtun women wanted to participate in the women's movement. However, due to the hurdles mentioned above, engaging with the Pashtun women's movement becomes challenging for them. They expressed a mix of being unapologetic and apologetic about their involvement in the women's rights struggle. An important factor that emerged in the interviews was the

labels attached to the demands and the activities of such a movement. While the broader term "women's rights" elicited less concern, the label "feminist" was more challenging for many participants to engage with.

Pashtun women's movement: Challenges and backlash

The women's movement in KP has never been an uninterrupted activity. It faced numerous challenges that dramatically affected its pace, depending upon the circumstances and the socio-political situation. Participants commented on a few hurdles, including issues related to government, media, the synergy of women rights activists and other structural problems. One participant explains these difficulties like this:

> Firstly, the negative portrayal of mainstream media on women's rights activities is a significant hurdle. Secondly, NOC issues are faced by NGOs and donor agencies. Thirdly, due to poverty, individuals joined women's groups for employment, and the absence of embodied belief in feminism contributed to the severe challenge faced by the women's movement. (Interview F)

The above statement indicates that the media frequently portrays women negatively, significantly impacting efforts to improve women's status in society. Different newspapers have highlighted government-imposed restrictions on acquiring a No Objection Certificate (NOC) for national and international NGOs and donor agencies involved in address-ing social issues to operate in KP (Nisa et al. 2021). The government cites national security as a reason for the NOC requirement. While educated women are expected to participate in and strengthen the women's movement, they often find it challenging to associate themselves with it, weakening it further. Additionally, the involvement of NGO-trained workers in the women's movement has transformed women's rights struggle into a project-based activity in Pakistan instead of a continual commitment to improving women's status in society and nurturing women's rights (Batool & Malik 2021). One participant explains the circumstances as such:

> The problem is that none of the feminist movements turned into a mainstream political movement. Every movement aligns with a political party; their agenda has never been integrated into feminist movements. Moreover, in mixed movements, women played an instrumental role, but once their goal was achieved, women were taken back to square one. That is why women's struggle, for the most part, is wasted, and inclusion and participation lead to their exclusion. (Interview B)

Another vital hurdle identified was a structural issue within the women's movement, which initially lacked enough strength to transform into an

independent mainstream political movement. Despite enthusiastic efforts by women to contribute to collective causes, their goals remained unattainable. Consequently, these collective struggles led to more exclusion rather than inclusion.

Concluding Thoughts

In the context of KP, a vibrant civil society is essential for nourishing social issues, particularly women's rights. Civil society primarily challenges the established norms and breaks the silence around taboo topics like no other institutional body can. When looking at women's rights through the lens of NGOs, many questions arise, but the significance of their contribution cannot be overlooked. The women's movement in KP is still nascent, striving to claim its place and space. The present research offered an opportunity to engage in discussion with educated Pashtun women, leading to their increased awareness of their contribution to the broader women's movement. Additionally, movements are very contextual in the contemporary era, keeping the diversity of time and issues in mind. It is necessary to constantly redefine movements because, over the years, there has been a shift in their meaning and form. Here, it would be interesting to investigate how technology, which has significantly evolved in nature and form over the past few years, impacts the women's movement in KP.

The women's movement has faced many challenges within the social and political context of KP. The proponents at forefront of the women's movement primarily consist of individuals working in government and non-government institutions mandated for women's issues. These departments include the KP Commission on the Status of Women, the women parliamentarian caucus, and various women NGOs, most operating at the national level and funded by international donors. In addition to these groups, some educated women collaborate with these organisations, actively producing women-centred activities and scholarships to advance the cause. Unfortunately, the study findings reflected that despite their involvement, educated women could not align themselves with the objectives of the women's movement at the national and provincial levels. They expressed reluctance and fear regarding adopting a feminist identity, a term used by the participants. This identity carries negative connotations, and women associating with it often face backlash.

The empirical data demonstrated that the study participants can be considered the vanguards of the Pashtun women's movements in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. All of them had propensities to support

women's rights and they could conveniently be divided into four categories: "unaware", "reluctant", "still in denial" or "unapologetic". Those who were unaware had no clue about the concept of a women's movement, though they were well aware of women's suppression in society. The participants who were "reluctant" were aware of the concept but were extremely conscious about their association with it due to personal, familial and Pashtun ethnic considerations.

The group who was "still in denial" were confused about whether their activities and actions could come under the umbrella term of the women's movement. They thought their work and the women's movements were two distinct activities with no intersecting points. Moreover, they feared feminism and society's disapproval in this regard. The last category, those who are "unapologetic", consists of women who were well-articulated and transparent in their thoughts and actions regarding their association with the women's movement. They were ready to bear the brunt of any action and ready to deal with the backlash they might experience. Thus, this handful of people were confident about identifying themselves as part of the women's movement and they were secure about holding a feminist identity. All four categories of participants had different opinions and levels of understanding and awareness regarding women-related issues, which cannot be compared because of their unique standpoints and experiences.

The discussion of these categories explains why Pashtun women feel more comfortable associating with PTM and less comfortable with the women's movement, even though they are both rights-based social movements intrinsically. Moreover, due to the ideological stance of PTM, most of the women did not encounter objections from their male family members when they wanted to participate; this is predominantly due to the goal of PTM to strengthen Pashtun ethnicity. The involvement of women in PTM occurred at two distinct levels: leadership and general participation. It is evident from the findings that urban-educated Pashtun women were part of PTM leadership to some extent; however, according to them, rural tribal women joined primarily because they were victims of state violence: they were mainly wives and daughters of missing or deceased persons. Furthermore, none of the participants felt comfortable associating with Aurat March because they could not relate to the participants and the ideas displayed during the marches, which were exacerbated by negative media coverage.

To conclude this study, it is evident that two distinct groups exist in KP. The first group includes members of civil society and government officials working to address women's issues. The second group comprises educated, career-oriented women working as lawyers,

professors, and journalists who are entirely aloof from the women's movement phenomenon and its existence in KP. There is a disconnect between these two groups, weakening the consolidated voice of women. It is imperative to facilitate a dialogue between both groups to evolve clarity of thoughts and to clear confusions and fears related to the conceptual framework of the women's movement. Educated women and early- to mid-career professionals can serve as potent resources by collaborating closely with various stakeholders who support the women's movement.

The women's movement encompasses all individuals, initiatives, and efforts of people from different walks of life working together towards a common goal. Furthermore, members of the women's movement must contemplate that terms such as "feminism" or "feminist" might provoke severe backlash in the traditional society of Pashtuns, necessitating strategic replacement. KP requires a robust women's movement to harness the potential of Pashtun women from various backgrounds—educated, uneducated, professional, and non-professional—transform-ing disconnected and disparate struggles into meaningful collective actions that can come together as the "women's movement".

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Endnotes

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[4] MFLO covered questions of succession, registration of marriages, polygyny, divorce, maintenance, dower, and dissolution of marriages. The Muslim Family Law Ordinance was the first legal effort in Pakistan to codify Muslim personal law and the first step towards protecting women in matters of marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance (Ahmad 1993).

[5] The Hudood Ordinances promulgated and modified existing criminal laws ranging from adultery, fornication, rape and prostitution (*zina*) and false testimony (*qazf*), theft and drinking alcoholic beverages. It also made *zina* (extramarital sex) an offence against the state rather than an inter-personal one. Additionally, the Qanun-e-Shahadat Order, 1984 (Law of Evidence) was promulgated, which stated that the 'evidentiary value of women's testimony is half that of a male witness in all matters' (S. Ali 2000, 50).

[6] "Pashtunwali" is the preferred spelling used in this paper. It is a patriarchal code that centres on a man's honour and his ability to protect the women in his family. Naseer (2022) discusses the Pashtunwali code, emphasising that while women hold esteemed roles in social relationships as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives, they are frequently denied their rightful entitlements and privileges in Pashtun society (KP) and Afghan society (Pashtun areas in Afghanistan), which here refers to both societies being culturally aligned. (Mosawi 2020; Shukla 2015; Benson & Siddiqui 2014).

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