

## Refereed article

# Mapping Pakistan's Heterogeneous, Diverse, and Stratified Civil Society and Democratization — Gendered Tales of Collaboration, Networking, and Contestation

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## Summary

Pakistan's civil society is marked by diversity in its forms of and spaces for agency, organization/institutionalization setup, value systems, agenda-setting, and the profiles of its constituent members — ranging from critical public intellectuals and dissident citizens to donor civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and socially segmented, as well as politically engineered, sociopolitical movements, among others. This leads to what can be understood as civil society being a highly heterogeneous, diverse, stratified field, one subject to the need to navigate through, and cope with, multiple sociopolitical cleavages, an often adverse sociopolitical climate, cycles of autocratic regression and fragile democratization attempts, rentier mentalities, as well as the securitization impact of multiple conflict dynamics and processes, to name just a few bedfellows. One of the primary consequences of civil society's configurations is the paucity of cross-cutting potential for solidarity, agency, and transformation, as apparent in the protests of Qadri and Imran Khan in Islamabad in 2014 or in the 2007/2008 Lawyer's Movement — actors all claiming a democratization agenda as their own. A certain exception, the author argues, are parts of the equally diverse and heterogeneous women's movement, part of civil society as a whole (as well as its gendered segment), who are collaborating and/or contesting with each other over multiple ideas and projects related to gender democracy and democratization. In this article four different and rather contrasting examples of gender-specific civil society activism will be reviewed, therein analyzing three representative challenges: (i) AASHA (Alliance Against Sexual Harassment Act) — the challenge of cooptation, collaborative politics, and/or lobbying; (ii) Subalterns Act — the challenge of grassroots activism in a stratified, militarized society; (iii) JI women activists — who are challenging transnational gender rhetoric and empowerment concepts through faith-based, party politics-linked activism; and, (iv) The TQK — the challenge of how to fight social invisibility and political marginalization.

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## Mapping civil society actors — Introductory reflections

Women's bodies and identities have been, and continue to be, a key site of contestation and definition of self and other in the Pakistani context (Rouse 1998: 69).

For over ten years now my research on women as political activists — be it in conventional or nonconventional politics — within the not so “postcolonial” polity of Pakistan has been unfolding, taking me across so many gendered, socioeconomic, as well as ideological divides within this hugely heterogeneous society. This social milieu is marked by high levels of contestation, and is a realm wherein the words “civil society” or “civil society activist” do not necessarily carry positive connotations for many a citizen. As it always seems a near impossible endeavor to even attempt to capture such intersecting complexities and contestations within a single article, I have selected four exemplary case studies that between them attempt to map this terrain of gendered Pakistani civil society — as well as its ideas, projects, and contestations over the nexus of gender and democratization, among other points of controversy.

The selection of these four case studies is done on the basis of their diversity and representativeness of certain key sociopolitical cleavages both within Pakistan's polity and civil society: (i) the rural–urban divide; (ii) a genderized ideological divide between such positions as “progressive, secular” and “conservative, religious” women's activists; (iii) a class divide in civil society activism, or the phenomenon of elite capture versus subaltern, grassroots activism; along with, (iv) the differences in networking strategies within the Pakistani political system and within civil society. In this sense, the case studies are a purposive sample chosen to demonstrate the diversity and heterogeneity of women's activism within Pakistan — and include in particular those forms of women's activism that are usually not at the center of attention when it comes to academic research and debates on the country's civil society. These cases thus allow us to gain a certain insight into the multiple negotiations, discourses, and practices of women's activists throughout Pakistan — across socioeconomic classes as well as localities — in a rather decentralized way. In other words, in one not focusing on predominant actors, their trajectories, and experiences — which are often criticized for being nonrepresentative of women in Pakistan in terms of membership diversity, agenda-setting, space for agency, and strategies used. Subsequently I will investigate how different types of women's activists express and negotiate their agenda-setting, voice, and agency in the overall contentious field of Pakistani civil society — as well as within a heterogeneous, somehow fragmented, women's movement.

The many different faces of Pakistan's civil society can be visualized by such diverse women's activists as, first, Samar Minallah, a Pashtun female filmmaker who is an outspoken, publicly visible commentator on many current affairs issues, even highly sensitive ones (with them thus being dangerous ones to engage in). Most recently, she spoke out on the burning of a Christian couple over their alleged

blasphemy in Punjab province in early November 2014 and on the high-profile attack on a school in Peshawar on December 16, 2014. She was filmed standing next to fiercely vocal secular feminist champion Tahira Abdullah of the Women's Action Forum, an organization that was established to protest military ruler Zia ul-Haq's Islamization policies and his opposition to any form of (international) donor funding. Visualization comes, second, from transnational women's activists like Farida Shaheed, director of Shirkat Gah, who is also a UN special representative alongside being in charge of the South Asia chapter of the transnational network of Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML).

A third face is Maryam Bibi, the founder of a network initiative aiming for the political mainstreaming of women from the FATA (Federal Administrated Tribal Agencies); as well, she is the head of Kwendo Khor (Sister's Home). The latter operates in areas of Pakistan that are usually impossible to enter for most, let alone those seeking to engage over a period of decades in community-based civil society activism where the mere label of being an "NGO worker" can get one killed. Fourth in this eclectic lineup are the many unnamed professional women's activists who work for the myriad of different NGOs that now exist — be they local, national, or transnational/international in focus — on the basis of a more donor-driven agenda within highly institutionalized settings. Or, fifth, are those crossing over between civil society activism and formal politics as advisors, ministers, or members of parliament.

Exemplaries of this, among many others, are Nilofar Bakhtiar, former Special Advisor to then Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, or Khawar Mumtaz, long-term activist with Shirkat Gah, who currently holds a cabinet rank position as Chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women. But maybe exemplary are also the "invisible," veiled activists — be they dressed so out of piety as members of faith-based women's organizations or be it due to the constant threats received as a women's activist, as elaborated on by one recent interviewee in Peshawar. She asked if she is a coward for not daring to show her face, for not raising her voice openly when engaging in politics; she also pondered whether lobbying in such an invisible way for women's voices to be present in (democratic) reform processes, as well as contesting "Taliban-ization," is enough to even qualify as activism. The gallery would not be complete without a new face on the international stage: that of Nobel Peace Laureate Malala Yousufzai, a child education and girls' rights activist, whose awarding of the peace prize not only led to laudations of her at home but also to numerous conspiracy theories, social media smear campaigns of a pronounced sexist nature, alongside her continued exile in the United Kingdom after she was attacked by the Pakistani Taliban in 2012 and after having been continuously threatened ever since.

All of these faces and different pathways also shed light on Pakistan's treacherous political process of democratic transitions being repeatedly aborted in the course of

recurring cycles of autocratic regression. These happen mostly in the garb of military fatigues, in sustained levels of politico-ideological conflict, as well as alongside prominent external interventions that are both violent and nonviolent in nature. These occurrences flash small spotlights on what it means to be a Pakistani civil society activist in such conjunctures. Before attempting to map women's activists diverse forms of agency in Pakistan's highly heterogeneous and stratified civil society, some preliminary conceptual reflections and disclaimers, ones taken from previous writings on gender and democratization as well as from comparative women's movement studies, are hence necessary to frame the empirical case studies that will be presented in due course.

Still writing from a pre-9/11 perspective and on the basis of a comparative focus on Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, Shahra Razavi (2001) highlighted the need to include a gender perspective on democratization and the governance of the public domain in the academic discourse. This is given the fact that respective institutions and political arenas — such as civil society or gender regimes — do not automatically address inequalities, asymmetries, or gaps in terms of representativeness, participation, and rights therein. At the same time, she then continues to further argue that autocratic suppression within the conventional political arena, which is often marked by elite control, shifts citizen's political participation and agency options toward joining political movements (as well as leading to an increase in women's political engagement in civil society), with prodemocracy alliances being one form of activity by which women's movements challenge autocratic rule on one of its most significant components (Razavi 2001: 204).

As a subcategory of social movements,<sup>1</sup> women's movements can, as conceptualized by Beckwith, be “both feminist and nonfeminist organizing and activism” (2005: 585). In other words, they exist as “networks that mount sustained political challenges, through collective action, to advance their interests” (2005: 585) by: (i) mobilizing women as actors as well as leaders; (ii) employing “gendered identity claims that serve as the basis for activism where women explicitly organize as, for example, mothers or daughters” (2005: 585). Consequently, women's organizations, initiatives, or networks can be either pursuing a transgressive or contained — meaning status quo-oriented — agenda of collective action. Furthermore, as outlined

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1 Schock (2008: 188) defines social movements as “organized, collective, and sustained attempts to promote social change that occur partially or entirely outside conventional politics. They incorporate extra-institutional methods of political action to promote change because government officials may be corrupt or unaccountable and institutional political channels may be blocked or ineffective. Social movement participants are often drawn from marginalized segments of society that are excluded from decision-making process altogether.” They can employ disruptive or creative, violent and/or nonviolent tactics, such as protest, persuasion, boycotts, civil disobedience, attacks, and/or kidnapping.

by, among others, gender and democratization scholar Georgina Waylen, female political activists across public arenas are marked by the fact that:

[...] identities are complex, comprising multiple intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality, leading individuals to react in different ways at different times. Women will act politically not simply on the basis of gender, but [of] race, class, and sexuality as well, in a complex interaction. In the same way as it is difficult to talk of a unitary category "woman" and women's interests, it is impossible, therefore, to talk of a women's movement. There is not one movement, but a diversity of different movements of which feminist movements are one part (1996: 18).<sup>2</sup>

She adds to this level of complexity, on the one hand, Deniz Kandiyoti's notion of the "patriarchal bargain" (meaning status quo-oriented/containing agendas and the endeavors of women's activists to sustain a patriarchal configuration), and, on the other, Molyneux's idea of practical as well as strategic "gender interests." The former are not necessarily transgressive, feminist, or even explicitly political, nor of an orientation that might shape political women's organizing within civil society (Waylen 1996: 20).

With regard to Pakistan, its civil society (and subsequently its women's movement/s) is marked by diversity in terms of forms of and spaces for agency, modes and scopes of organization, normative orders, agenda-setting, and the profiles of its constituent members. The latter include, to name but a few, critical public intellectuals and oppositional citizen activists (such as those resisting rightwing hegemonic mullahs in northern Chitral, see Marsden 2013), donor civil society and professionalized NGOs, youth and student activists and trade unionists, grassroots movements, segmented and elite-steered social movements, organizations coopted by the state or by national political parties, autonomous issue-based networks and the loosely organized initiatives of civil society activists otherwise gathered together in temporary strategic alliances, along with traditional civil society's welfare organizations and charity-oriented foundations. In all its diversity, this South Asian nation's civil society is characterized by a number of overarching challenges and perils, ones that merit being mentioned briefly (although this list is by no means exhaustive):

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2 I would like to thank one of the anonymous peer reviewers for pointing out that research on Latin American NGOs as well as on Palestinian feminism has indicated that "groups also differ on internal ideological dimensions, with some preferring to advance a feminist agenda within larger political movements/parties (for example, the Communist Party) and with others wanting a purely feminist organization without reference to other political agendas." For the case of Pakistan, research is needed to map in detail how women's activists strategize along those lines and thus either crossover in the course of their activist biography from one organizational form and political arena to the other. To my knowledge, this research work is still a desideratum. As outlined in this article, elite women's activists are marked by double militancy (Beckwith 2010: 31), that is by linkages to multiple organizations, formal political institutes and state structures, and subsequently competing collective identities as activists — as well as being gender advisors to state institutions, members of national commissions, etc.

- *powerful elements of “uncivil society,”* in other words violent actors influencing, shaping, or operating within the realms of civil society and the respective polity, as well as in its discourses, practices, and interactions;
- the *securitization* of issues, discourses, and public arenas in light of sustained conflicts, periods of praetorian democracy, and the logic and manifold encounters of political violence;
- the *structural impediments* of societal heterogeneity and stratification, with them impacting on the scope, radar, and outreach potential of civil society organizations/movements and their capacity for solidarity across existing cleavages and for subsequent sociopolitical transformation;
- *cycles of autocratic regression* away from fragile democratization attempts, against the backdrop of a systemically powerful military-bureaucratic establishment;
- *dichotomies and segmentations within “civil society,”* meaning donor-funded “contractors” versus grassroots community-based organizations, ideological/ethnolinguistic/class- or issue-based polarizations;
- *traces of a “rentier mentality”* in light of external funding as well as cooptation into state institutions and agendas, circumstances impacting on civil society’s autonomy, agenda-setting, and chosen activism strategies (Zaidi 2011).

This leads to a Janus-faced hydra for civil society to slay: while repeated episodes of “collaborative politics” and a paucity of confrontational civil society forces continue to obstruct a genuine transformation of state and society, the “close accommodation between civil and uncivil society” leads to a “depoliticization of public life in Pakistan” (Zaidi 2011: 216) — as well as to subsequent democratization attempts by social movements, among others. From a women’s movement perspective, and as I have argued elsewhere, gender issues are of a complex and contested nature in Pakistan. This is a country where a variety of national, international, and transnational actors are all involved, and where traditional social forces use feminist agenda issues as a bargaining chip or as a vehicle for their own widely divergent political-ideological struggles and societal visions. In addition, women’s activism in Pakistan has always had to defend itself against charges of Westernization, of promoting an alien agenda (or even so-called “Westoxification”) — claims linked to the issue of class in a highly stratified society wherein women activists mainly derive from the (upper) middle echelons and from the elite.

The class factor is perceived to work in two distinct ways for the agenda, strategies, and goals of the Pakistani women’s movement: on the one hand, the privileged class’ background resulted in specific foci and demands in the initial years of the movement (Rouse 1998: 55f.), ones determined by their different experiences regarding citizenship status. This played out, for example, in the arenas of access to employment opportunities and to educational, legal, and state institutions, realms

that are to this day still highly contingent with regard to class and rural/urban locality — specifically, in terms of mobility, opportunity structures, and enforceable (protective) privileges. Given the high degree of stratification and fragmentation within Pakistani society, with little cross-class interaction occurring and no real engagement of women and men on equal terms, a spill-over effect from experiences and gains could not take place. The same is true as regards the cross-class participation of women (that is, a broad-based movement) on a joint agenda addressing the need to respect the huge diversity of Pakistani women, as well as their miscellaneous concerns, realities, and agency options (see Jalal 1991: 78; Rouse 1998: 56). On the other hand, women's activists and feminist scholars such as Khawar Mumtaz and Shaheen Sardar Ali have emphasized that women's activists hailing from society's upper echelons actually opened up avenues for wider agency, as only elite women had the requisite knowledge of sociopolitical institutions, access to resources, and a sufficiently secured social status to even be able to challenge gender norms and the misogynist discourses and practices of traditional state and civil society actors (Ali 2000: 56; Mumtaz 2005: 67).

At the same time, the women's movement's agenda was always linked to the quest for democratization. In this respect, one needs to consider the set of opportunity structures, resources, and discourses consequently available to women's activists in a given sociocultural and political context (Asfar, cited in Randall 1998: 192f.). As previously mentioned, Pakistan's state-civil society institutions and relationships have found themselves situated throughout the country's history for the most part in a "hybrid authoritarian context" in which civil society still has "to emerge as an independent, legally protected, public realm of associational and civic activity" (Shah 2004: 357–358). The circumstances of the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (in its partition from British India) as a nation for the Muslims in the South Asian subcontinent led to distinct social features emerging, among them the prominent role of religion in both state and society — in addition to the lingering "insecurity complex" (Jalal 1991: 86) of the newly born nation vis-à-vis its large neighbor, India. In their engagement with the state apparatus, Pakistani women's groups have to decide between (i) respect for the limits of policy formulation, and cooptation with either modernist or conservative governmental agendas or (ii) a confrontational approach, specifically by challenging a neopatriarchal state that formulates, represents, and reproduces gendered — and most often patriarchal — hierarchies, discourses, and practices. In both approaches lies the danger of counteractivism and a "tendency towards tailism; i.e., allowing the direction of struggle to be determined by the state" (Rouse 1988: 13; Shaheed 1998: 157). Additionally Pakistani civil society itself remains a complex and contested playing field for the country's women's movement — "an arena for negotiation, struggle, and engagement" (Randall 1998: 199) — given the double watershed of post-1979 and post-9/11 surges in politico-religious conservative as well as extremist forces and discourses. These waves of intolerance in Pakistan and worldwide have liaised

successfully with the state at multiple levels, and imposed a nearly nonmutable voice in the country's contemporary societal debates and policymaking. This increasingly influential countermovement, in which women do also participate as activists, challenges the progressive, "liberal" camp of the women's movement — in terms of values, agenda-setting, space for agency — through the adopting of similar strategies (such as service provisions in education, health, law) and topics of concern (albeit under a divergent ideological framework). Afiya Shehrbano Zia argues that 9/11 and the global "War on Terror" that has followed has had a significantly negative fallout for women's activism and political identities,

[which have been] constructed within a larger patriarchal discourse of both the War on Terror and nationalist identities. The War on Terror furthered this cleavage and has lent a certain political credibility and legitimacy to faith-based feminism as the alternative to a larger, imperialist, US-sponsored, Westernized women's rights discourse (Zia 2009: 31).

In addition, extremist groups continue to contest, narrow, or even abolish altogether the sociopolitical space available to such civil society organizations and initiatives in the country. This they do through both violent as well as nonviolent means, such as campaigns of intimidation and threats, personal attacks, radio sermons, Friday prayers, or anti-women franchise pacts with local political leaders. The desired outcome here is to impose and enforce stricter gender roles prescriptions and practices within Pakistan.

Having said that, women's activism in the country has changed significantly over time in terms of parameters, strategies, and agenda-setting — with it now being marked by increasing levels of diversity and heterogeneity. While in the decades coming immediately after independence a state patronage and charity/care approach predominantly characterized women's civil society activism, stewardship thereof changed significantly with the rise to power of military dictator Zia ul-Haq. It was his post-1979 Islamization policies that triggered a new wave, if not the genuine beginning, of the autonomous women's movement in Pakistan. The Women's Action Forum was founded as an anti-state lobby-cum-pressure group, one using diverse forms of protest, refusing external funding, and focusing less on sustainable strategic networking or alliance-/partnership-building.

Another paradigmatic shift of sorts occurred post-1990 with the increasing proliferation of NGOs and their focus on human development agendas, alongside the institutionalization and professionalization of large segments of the country's women's movement. Pakistani domestic organizations, networks, and initiatives now increasingly engaged in transnational cooperation and networking with other NGOs — be they local or international — as well as with international organizations such as UN agencies or development cooperation agencies. However, radicalism has ever since continued to be used by a number of actors as an opt-out option, such as was the case during the period of governance of former military ruler Pervez Musharraf in the debate over (the perceived watering-down of) the Zina revisions,



which have been a key agenda and rallying point for most segments of the women's movement in Pakistan ever since Zia's Islamization turn. The continued rise of NGOs comes at a price: women's activism has not only turned into an income-generating field and now less one of voluntary participation, but, moreover, allegations continue to arise among the general public regarding the women's movement's local autonomy in terms of agenda-setting, strategies, and activities coming against the backdrop of powerful international gender mainstreaming interventionist actors such as UN Women, political foundations, or (non)governmental development cooperation agencies/organizations. Furthermore, charges of transnational cooptation or even Westernization (thus leading to a lack of indigenous "authenticity") are coinciding with questions of the women's movement's transversal agency and the transformative potential for the width and depth of Pakistani society. Thus it remains questioned whether change will extend beyond the realm of the highly urbanized, educated, and subsequently limited elite segment of civil society; in other words, whether it will ultimately penetrate Pakistani society at large.

In the following sections, four different initiatives and forms of Pakistani women's activism will be reviewed. These are all challenging mainstream perceptions and classifications of Pakistani women's activism, and between them represent divergent attempts and strategies to translate transformative societal potential and different takes on women's issues into reality.

### **Vignette 1: With or against the state? — The Alliance Against Sexual Harassment (AASHA)'s network governance alliance and challenges of cooptation, collaboration, and effective lobbying for change**

AASHA was founded in 2001 by women's activist and development specialist Fouzia Saeed, in the wake of a case of sexual harassment at UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) Pakistan that involved eleven female members of staff. After ten years of intense civil society-based lobbying, AASHA's efforts were crowned in 2010 by the codification of sexual harassment in the workplace. Functioning as a governance alliance-cum-radical activism, it involved both individual civil society activists and organizations formed for a specific issue over a limited period of time, namely: (1) the codification of anti-sexual harassment legislations in Pakistan's civil and penal code, alongside (2) a societal awareness and civic education campaign, as well as (3) an implementation period at the grassroots level, meaning workplaces across the formal sectors of the country's economy (and thus excluding the large informal economy, as well as, so far at least, education institutions such as universities with regard to staff-student relations) (Ahmad 2012).

Different to the general trend of the grant-seeking NGO-ization of Pakistan's civil society experienced since the 1990s, AASHA used and pooled its own network partners' resources for the campaign's activities instead of seeking funding from international donors. This initial break with the trend of a donor-funded civil society, prevalent in many parts of the Global South, is interesting, as it shows activists were concerned with their own agenda-setting, decision-making on strategizing, and sequencing of their advocacy and lobbying work. Furthermore, it makes the claim of foreign influence or allegations of Westoxification difficult to uphold, in particular in a context of civil society contestations occurring across the ideological spectrum on sensitive issues such as sexual harassment. In addition, AASHA understood itself as a voluntary-based, nonhierarchical alliance, whose different members — regardless of their own individual or organizational stance on state–society relations — would not act out an anti-state approach, rather seeking cooperation and coalition with different stakeholders within political institutions, the ministerial bureaucracy, private sector, media, and other key public institutions. As a result of the use of diverse, fluid, and complex strategies outlined in the following, this governance network alliance is difficult to classify within a matrix of conventional feminist practices.

First, AASHA used flexible, stakeholder-specific discourse strategies and reference frames that differed, for example, for their respective engagements with security forces, the judiciary, trade unions, chambers of commerce, local government representatives, national legislators, or media personnel. Second, the latter — national media and procampaign journalists — were key in AASHA's intensive use of the media for campaign purposes. Third, and different to the all-so-prominent elite capture and often segmented activism of Pakistan's civil society, AASHA networked at a low threshold, reaching out to and involving guards, low-level clerks, and secretaries working at key ministries and parliament during their lobbying (Ahmad 2012).

The core principles of AASHA's rights-based activism were to: (i) define and criminalize sexual harassment in the work place in the penal code of Pakistan; (ii) formulate and disseminate a binding code of conduct as well as complaint-cum-inquiry mechanism for those institutions and organizations signing up to it, including codified sanctions in case of noncompliance; and, (iii) establish the position of an ombudsperson. To achieve this goal, years of intense strategic lobbying and crisis management with involved stakeholders — such as the government, both houses of parliament, the ministerial bureaucracy, as well as private companies — in their individual decision-making processes was necessary, following therein an inclusive, bottom-up approach. AASHA's members prepared briefings, speeches, legislative drafts (and subsequent revisions), and conducted action research and participatory discussions with strategic multilevel stakeholders — be they situated at the local, regional/provincial, national, or international level. Action research provided additional insight into the complex matter at hand, as well

as data/“evidence” for stakeholders to lobby and convince those operating in their own settings, along with annual meetings of working women to provide not only a platform for exchange but also for sensitization for the key stakeholders invited to those meetings. While many activists highlight and focus on key political stakeholders, public debates, and policymaking, AASHA used a business first, government second strategy. In other words, the abovementioned code of conduct was disseminated, signed, and implemented by private companies — with them being honored by the so-called AASHA Awards — so as to create public momentum and recognition, to increase societal ownership, and to establish a network and support system beyond the political realm — crucial also for the implementation and compliance process after the ratification of the bill (Ahmad 2012).

Different to the previous experiences during the Musharraf era — when a number of gender-specific legislative drafts on diverse issues such as so-called “honor killings,” domestic violence, or the 2006 Women’s Protection Act were watered down or thrown out because private member bills were competing with government ones, multiple legislative drafts were presented on the same issue, or because politicoreligious counteractivism against feminism projects presented a nearly unsurmountable challenge — AASHA managed to now control the content of the legislative draft and its subsequent revisions presented in parliament. This it did by attending all sessions and by interacting with all stakeholders involved, as well as with parts of the state apparatus. With the 2010 passage of the bill, AASHA dismantled its governance network alliance after two years were completed for its implementation campaign. This second phase was supported by international donors, as external financial resources were required so as to ensure the vast dissemination and outreach campaign succeeded and so as to ensure compliance mechanisms were adequately established (Ahmad 2012).

## **Vignette 2: The Subalterns Act?! — Grassroots activism in a stratified, militarized society**

Be it within Pakistan or beyond its borders, a one million member strong nonviolent grassroots movement, formed in October 2000 in the province of Punjab, has barely been acknowledged or even heard about by the outside world. This symbol of subaltern resistance is predominantly centered in Multan, Khanewal, Sargodha, Okara and Lahore, where (not only) farms like the Okara Military Farms or Renala Military Farms are the focal point for contentious activism for tenants, their land rights, and in opposition to their exploitation. Accompanied by massive public demonstrations, protests, and other forms of contentious politics under the banner of “ownership or death” or “land to the tiller” the Anjuman-i Mazarin-i Punjab (Association of Tenant Farmers of Punjab, AMP) was established to represent peasants’ interests vis-à-vis the all-powerful feudal agricultural elite and Pakistan’s

military — a (if not the) powerful political and economic actor. A culmination of the movement was the 2010 Long March of 15,000 landless peasants from Okara to Lahore (Mumtaz and Mumtaz 2012; Toor 2012).

The strife over land and peasants rights is a colonial conflict legacy centered around an agricultural area and irrigation system of 56,655 km<sup>2</sup> premised on selective, elitist, and either feudal civilian or military-dominated land use and property rights. In Pakistan's post-1947 political dispensation, this highly inegalitarian and feudal system has led to the marginalization of the impoverished peasant population and the tenants who constitute it. This has occurred specifically through a disadvantageous regime of taxation on an measurement of agricultural products, restrictions on solid housing construction, high levels of social control, military land grabbing, along with the forced resettlement or displacement of peasants (Mumtaz and Mumtaz 2012: 139ff.).

For the purpose of this article, the significant number of activist women involved herein is interesting, especially when considering that they are engaged alongside or separate from male relatives in a rather conservative context with low levels of women's political participation and despite massive repressive police violence — including incarcerations, beatings, sieges of villages, imposition of mobility restrictions, as well as attempts to divide the movement along sectarian and religious lines (as AMP activists belong to different faith groups). Most peasant women activists first mobilized after experiencing the imprisonment or repression of male relatives, who are the predominant breadwinners for Pakistani families — regardless of women's crucial (informal) roles in the country's agricultural production chain. They formed women's groups at village and district levels and became active in the form of so-called "thapa troops," women's groups guarding and shielding their villages from security forces' interventions using a traditional wash stick or cooking utensils. In their protest against and resistance to the prohibition of the construction of solid houses or the collection of due payment of harvest shares on military farms, women have participated through hunger strikes, sit-ins, and being present at court hearings, seminars, workshops, press conferences, and even for some the World Social Forum. In 2001 women and children blocked a national highway as well as village entrances for days and weeks on end. Aqueela Naz and Munawwar Bibi became key figures for the peasant women's movement, which in 2008 resulted in the formation of the Peasant Women's Society as part of the AMP (Mumtaz and Mumtaz 2012; Toor 2012).

In fact women have often gone a step ahead of men. To organise women we went door to door to convince them that if under the contract system their land is taken away how will they meet the needs of their families (Female teacher Rubina Albert, quoted in: Mumtaz and Mumtaz 2012: 143).

One key demand is land rights for landless women peasants to be provided from the land that is owned by the state — making it a subaltern movement similar to those seen in Brazil or other parts of Latin America's in the course of the leftist

renaissance of the past decade and a half. With this move, the Peasant Movement changed from a gender-unspecific, nonsectarian collective mode of resistance in favor of a change in the tenant remuneration system and against exploitation toward a “women in movement” activism with distinct gender-specific demands for property rights as part of the general overall agenda.

Mumtaz and Mumtaz (2012: 146–148) highlight in their study some preliminary outcomes from peasant women’s activism. According to their empirical survey and interview findings, the level of domestic violence as well as gender segregation has decreased and access to education increased. While women’s property rights are now part of the collective struggle for land rights, women activists’ participatory dividend varies according to age and level of education, with older and less educated women benefiting less than younger and more educated ones. But they also caution with regard to these findings that “[the fact that] women activists are afraid of losing the space they have managed to create is equally indicative of gender-biased ground realities” beyond the specific struggle for land and tenant rights (Mumtaz and Mumtaz 2012: 148).

Given that the military is Pakistan’s largest land and property owner in urban as well as rural areas, and with it also having an extensive patronage network, Sadia Toor highlights the unique boldness and steadfastness of this subaltern resistance against a not so postcolonial “neoliberal security state”:

Today the farmers (unofficially) control the majority of the land in the military farms, and still steadfastly refuse to pay any rent. The army continues its harassment and the civilian government has reneged on promises made to the leadership, but the movement remains and is undivided. [It is the] largest genuinely grassroots-based social movement in Pakistan’s history and yet has no connection with Islam, jihad, or sectarian militancy (Toor 2012: 40–41).

The importance of this subaltern movement, linked through the Women’s Peasant Society to the quest of the country’s women’s movement for equal rights and the repeal of discriminatory laws, is even more significant if two further aspects of it are also taken into account. The subaltern use of nonviolent contentious politics and the movement’s successful resistance have to be evaluated against the backdrop of legal impunity for military land grabbing and the exploitation of resources in other provinces like Baluchistan, home to an ethnonationalist insurgency intertwined with the political violence of the War on Terror — a phenomenon that scholars like Toor (2012) and Siddiqi (2012) call the neoliberal “economic empire” of Military Inc. Second, this unique grassroots movement — which is largely marginalized from a mainstream civil society marked more than often by NGO-ization, class-based as well as rural–urban segmentation, and elitism — is a nonsectarian, inclusive movement that was only at a later stage supported by some national NGOs and the country’s liberal elite. Toor (2012: 53) opines that the limited resistance of elite civil society actors against neoliberal practices has to do, among other things, with their activism’s focus on combatting Taliban-ization tendencies subsequently being sort

of coopted by the military's society- and polity-wide securitization paradigm and discourse.

Although NGO activists did eventually get involved once the movement had made it to the headlines — sadly, with disastrous results for the movement — their absence from what was essentially the front-line of the struggle of ordinary Pakistanis was no coincidence. Ironically, in its efforts to discredit the movement, the military establishment has taken the line that it is only a NGO initiative and not a genuine movement (Toor 2012: 49).

In contrast Mumtaz and Mumtaz disagree, pointing toward the fact that:

[The] strong support from civil society organisations, national and international humanitarian organisations and the media [which] needs to be noted. Besides moral support, free legal aid, accommodation during court appearances, and financial help were [also] provided. [...] The ensuing public debate served to strengthen the peasants' resolve (Mumtaz and Mumtaz 2012: 142).

In my own informal conversations with civil society analysts, however, they problematized the prevailing scarcity of, delays in, or reluctance toward intersectional civil society solidarity and connectivity with grassroots initiatives, beyond the key support of leftwing political parties. This is because a number of women's organizations were created by leftwing activists in response to Zia ul-Haq's rightwing Islamization policies and the subsequent repression of Pakistan's leftist politics and activists, who consequently should have been not only sympathetic but actually ideologically inclined to side with — or even openly support — the (Women's) Peasant Society even from its early stages onward.

As outlined in *Breakdown in Pakistan. How Aid Is Eroding Institutions for Collective Action* (2013), Bano argues that the NGO-ization of leftwing activism — including the women's movements poster organizations Aurat Foundation and Shirkat Gah — is to blame for the lack of such intersectional large-scale collective action and solidarity. Additionally, the influx of official development assistance funds and certain other factors have contributed to this too: many “joined the NGOs because they realized that it is difficult to mobilize people purely on the basis of ideas” (activist quoted in Bano 2013: 51). Consequently this gave “rise [to] a new form of collective action platform in Pakistan,” one which is no longer volunteer-based — but rather highly professionalized and centered predominantly on “advocacy or service delivery” (Bano 2013: 51). Another case in point is the assassination of social worker and director of Karachi's Orangi Pilot Project Parween Rehman, whose activism for safe shelter and access to basic services for the urban poor was paid homage to at the 2013 Rural Women's Day in Islamabad (*Express Tribune* 02.11.2013). She may have been killed due to her knowledge about and activism against land grabbing and encroachment — so far justice is awaiting delivery, as is a large-scale support campaign by civil society to demand that the perpetrators are even brought to justice. Shirkat Gah director and UN special representative Farida Shaheed has hence demanded that “activists and women's

groups must continue to develop and nurture collective discursive spaces for women and maintain pressure for government support for these,” given the limited outreach capacity of feminist organizations — specifically in order to stretch its “transformative potential [...] albeit collaboration constraints” vis-à-vis a powerful state apparatus (Shaheed 2013: 133).

### **Vignette 3: Faith- and party-based “inspired” activism — Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) women members contesting notions of feminist women’s activism**

As a distinct feature of post-1990s international and transnational political processes (such as the Beijing Process or CEDAW annual reviews), alongside the international interventions in conflict-prone societies across the Global South, a distinct form or segment of a largely donor-sponsored civil society emerged in countries like Pakistan. This is, namely, a gendered-focused arena, one in which myriads of international both governmental and nongovernmental actors coalesce with local NGOs and community-based organizations under the framework of gender interventions in the areas of women’s empowerment, leadership, income generation and political mainstreaming. Within Pakistan, this “newly emerging gendered civil society” (Jamal 2012a: 144) is often, once again, class-specific, ideologically stratified, and subject to political contestation. A key debate revolves around the notions of “empowerment” and “gender equality” in the country’s numerous religious-political ideological debates. Can there be empowerment within religiously conservative frames? Can women activists be veiled, burqa-clad; or, should they shun veiling as an expression of their empowerment? Do we still talk about it being women’s activism for empowerment if quota provisions are contested, male guardianship over women in everyday matters is cherished, or the moral regulation of dress codes and religious practices are advanced in one’s agenda for addressing women’s issues?

In this regard, the activism of female members of the Islamist political party JI, and of its associated civil society organizations, challenges — via the very issue of nonveiling — the perceived mainstream of a women’s movement based on liberal-progressive ideas and egalitarian notions of gender equity. JI women’s activists tap in to and occupy the same societal space as secular activists and use the same concepts and discourses for their own women’s rights advocacy and support services; but, they do it with different conceptions and connotations in terms of gender ideology and gender roles prescriptions within an Islamist framework (Jamal 2012a: 150ff.; Zia 2009: 35, 37f.). Their focus is on lower to middle class women as well as working class ones, those who were originally not engaged in civil society organizations or social movements but who were rather regarded as the clientele of women’s activism. Their specific mobilization started in the period of General Pervaiz Musharraf’s rule, with its ideological dogma of “enlightened moderation”

(2002–2008) through the reintroduction of reserved seats at the provincial and national levels of the political system. After 2008 JI activists continued their political and societal engagement both within as well as outside the country's political institutions and aspired to the role model of a “modern [pious] Muslim woman,” mostly of a (lower) middle class background. This is not understood as an expression of Islamic feminism, as challenging patriarchal structures and values from within religion, or even as a secular agenda for that matter. Activists openly contest and oppose a feminist movement in Pakistan, as manifested in the activism of key organizations such as Shirkat Gah, Aurat, or the Women's Action Forum. This is linked with their overall critique of the socioeconomic and political configuration of the country, including men's status and rights, according to their vision of an alternate Islamic modernity, one untainted by Westoxification and the subsequent encroachment of alien forms of women's activism (Jamal 2012a: 143–144, 2012b: 68–69). Exemplary is the statement of Atiya Nisar, convener of the JI's Women's Commission: “Get my husband his rights and I will get mine, too” (as quoted in: Jamal 2012a: 153).

Ji activists seek to establish a non-elitist, indigenous, veiled thus purdah-based women's activism via (i) communicating and framing a public normative counterdiscourse and (ii) influencing existing political discourses and cultural frames. The latter are perceived to have been negatively affected by neoliberal globalization, transnational feminism, and Western democracy, as the advocated core political model of a modern state (See Jamal 2012a, 2012b).

Thus the appropriation of the modern universal public sphere as the necessary condition for securing the Islamization project has expedited, and been hastened by, the engendering of Islamist politics in Pakistan (Jamal 2012a: 146).

Activities undertaken are manifold, and, in certain aspects, along the lines of those also employed by secular women's organizations: religious education in urban centers, counselling and support for female victims of targeted violence, literacy courses, legal aid, support of wedding costs, as well as research and subsequent publications designed to influence public debates. One key pillar is the JI Women's Commission, with its own mission statement for women's religiously framed socioeconomic, political, and cultural rights — as well as for working women and their rights and needs too (Jamal 2012a: 148).

According to Jamal, to a certain extent this ideological fault line is a manifestation of colonial legacies, class conflicts, experiences of cultural marginalization, as well as of English–Urdu elite dichotomies. Alongside all of these is a distinct agenda of Islamization, featuring communitarian political activism and a politico-religious agenda:

Jamaat women situate Pakistani feminist leaders in a different social class and cultural location from themselves and the mass of Pakistani society, and therefore consider them incapable of seriously engaging with the problems of non-elite women in society. [...] While Pakistan's feminist women's movement comprises



and represents women from middle and lower classes, its leadership is undeniably in the hands of upper middle class (though not necessarily elite) women who have acquired Western education, are usually proficient in English and professionally trained. For Jamaat women, this opens the feminist project to charges of inauthenticity and disloyalty to the nation (Jamal 2012a: 154, 157f.).

In response, secular women's activists like Nighat Said Khan as well as critical writers like Amina Jamal point toward the elite status of influential JI clergy and members of Islamist groups. Consequently, such commentators see in this contestation rather an intra-elite conflict than one between different societal segments or between members of different social classes (Jamal 2012a: 155). For Afiya Shehrbano Zia,

[Ultimately] the issue of religious identity [...] within the women's movement in Pakistan [...] has serious implications for its feminist future. [It] has been the simultaneous resistance and co-option of liberal (modern) ideals by women in right and Islamic fundamentalist movements that have enabled a newly constructed identity of feminism and women's relationships with the state. In the process, the agenda as well as the methodologies of the progressive Pakistani women's movement have been challenged, redefining feminism in our context (Zia 2009: 30).

#### **Vignette 4: Brave Tribal Sisters (TQK)'s puzzle, or how to fight invisibilities and exclusion**

In recent months, my own research on women's activism in Pakistan has led me to a series of interviews with activists from multiple generations and standpoints in the major urban centers of Pakistan. These conversations have illustrated the diverse strategies, experiences, and dynamics — as well as more often than not precarious nature — of the activism that continues to be characteristically undertaken by Pakistan's women's movement(s). More interesting for this article's focus and argumentation are the interviews and informal conversations conducted with civil society activists, politicians, intellectuals, and experts on a new network initiative, TQK, that has arisen so as to mainstream women's political activism from one of the politically as well as socioeconomically deprived and segregated areas of the country — the earlier mentioned FATA —, with it being launched by the already introduced activist Maryam Bibi. The TQK was founded in 2012 as a loose network alliance by civil society activists from various backgrounds, and has been supported since then by a number of different women's, FATA community-based, and/or umbrella organizations. Backing has also come from NGO workers, academics, individual activists from a range of different professions, those involved in politics, civil servants, and intellectuals — both male and female alike.

Similar to the AASHA, the TQK so far lacks proper institutionalized structures and funding — with it tapping instead into its members' individual, collective, and organizational resources and solidarity so as to be able to organize meetings, workshops, training and awareness raising sessions, press conferences, and/or

political meetings. Dozens of women from the FATA — be they educated or illiterate, urban- or rural-based, politically aware, organized or not — have been mobilized to raise women’s ideas, concerns, and needs in the FATA political reform process currently under debate at both the provincial and national levels. In an area of the country where any (gender-specific) civil society activism sociopolitically transformative in nature appears to be next to impossible — given the high levels of gender segregation, political violence, militarization-cum-securitization — the TQK’s initial steps are more than promising. They are fighting invisibilities and the exclusion of subaltern women’s voices and ideas from an area where political citizenship is barely in its infant steps, and where the militant elements of uncivil society are dominating an arena that is also marked by myriad forms of violent intervention. Added into the mix is a politicization of religion to the extent that the issue of veiling or not is currently not even an issue on the agenda — one veils to reach out to the community, with its wearing not being a marker of one’s religious-ideological orientation but rather a powerful tool for women’s mobility and subsequent activism.

For this purpose, social media platforms are employed to organize and mobilize, and to communicate to stakeholders at the provincial and national levels. Traditional social networks, mixed with more recent CSO ones, are called on too, as are male guardians like husbands and sons — who serve as a convenient mobility enhancer for probably highly progressive women’s activism, and thus incremental empowerment, in a markedly highly conservative, volatile, and violent environment. One political agent and women’s activist asked us at the end of the interview if we considered her a coward because she does not raise her voice without taking off her veil, because she does not dare over the threats already received. These are the choices that she makes because of the precarious support of her family, with them being concerned about her transgression of gender roles boundaries as well as her potential victimization in a context of political violence. My research assistant and I were without words for a minute, and with tears in our eyes. Our answer was a vigorous, loud and emphatic “no,” after her extensive descriptions of forms of political resistance, party work, and women’s rights activism. Wearing a face veil or not is unimportant — it is merely a strategy, one that can change. This was the case for one women’s activist interviewed in Peshawar in late 2014, who started her activism burqa-clad and donned it four months ago, moving with more clout and assertiveness in her activism, step by step, but with the same agenda — transforming Pakistani women’s socioeconomic and political marginalization and invisibility.

### **Conclusions from a mapping attempt? — Civil society, gender, and democratization in Pakistan**

It is more than likely that in both the short- and long-term future Pakistan’s civil society will be marked by greater diversity in terms of forms of and spaces for

agency, organization/institutionalization, value systems, agenda-setting, and the profiles of constituent members. The latter range from critical public intellectuals and dissident citizens to donor civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and socially segmented as well as politically engineered sociopolitical movements, among others. Civil society activists in general, as well as women's activists in particular, will continue to negotiate their way through the highly heterogeneous, diverse, stratified field known as civil society. They will be subject to the need to navigate through and cope with multiple sociopolitical cleavages, an often adverse sociopolitical climate, cycles of autocratic regression and fragile democratization attempts, rentier mentalities, as well as the securitization impact of multiple conflict dynamics and processes, to name just a few of the factors that will be in play for the foreseeable future. Many, if not most, will use democracy — in one of its many models, ranging from liberal to politico-religious — as a key reference frame, mission statement, and slogan in their activism. As many both activists and scholars understand it, democratization is not only a political but also an economic and sociocultural project and process.

In the case of Pakistan, contestations over Westoxification and the (democratic) rights of individual citizens, and in particular of women, remain one cleavage, with it intersecting with other ones that are characterized by high levels of political violence and by powerful, conservative, and autocratic countermovements. These are often supported and orchestrated by forces operating from within the state apparatus. This ultimately leads to a second key form of contestation within the nexus of civil society and democratization: asymmetrical state–civil society relations lead to an active — but also precarious, fragile, and less autonomous — civil society, one subjected to limited transversal agency, fragmentation, exploitation, and/or collaboration. Furthermore, it is coopted more often than not by autocratic rather than democratic agendas, specifically by powerful actors existing within the state's institutions as well as within (un)civil society. A third point of contestation is the intertwined issues of representation, accountability, and participation vis-à-vis the currently high level of societal stratification — be it within (gender) civil or political society for that matter. How democratic can civil society be if more often than not a small segment of the socioeconomic elite (and its powerful cross-cutting networks) is as dominant in this field as it is in politics, economics, or education? And how genuine and successful can its democratization claims and projects within wider society be given the fact that any social movement needs a wider societal base to triumph, to move from limited collective actions to truly transformative ones? In this regard, cases such as the Peasant Movement as well as the TQK are interesting laboratories for civil society activism and its respective democratization projects; however, they remain largely overlooked or marginalized — albeit only for the time being at least one might hope.

I started this article by asking how different types of women's activists articulate and negotiate their agenda-setting, voice, and agency, both within the overall

contentious field of Pakistani civil society and within a heterogenous, somehow fragmented, women's movement. As briefly outlined (due to space constraints) in the case studies, the women's movement of Pakistan has evolved in an ever-expanding and diversifying space when it comes to different kinds of actors, agenda-settings, voices, and strategies. Some of it might be in response either to previously experienced contestations or to a lack of norm diffusion-cum-implementation, such as in the case of the AASHA. Here, the deliberate move toward a voluntary-based, nonfunded, and resource-pooling network governance approach was selected in light of the watered-down bills on women's issues formulated under the Musharraf government, of countermovement claims of Westoxification, as well as of out-of-movement alliance-building at multiple levels — undertaken first to ensure the compliance with and implementation of the norms to be codified. In addition, flexible issue framing was a key strategy to ensure a policy change and support the subsequent steps of its implementation.

In contrast, the TQK is still at an initial stage of networking and institutionalization, using, however, also similar approaches of network activism and resource pooling within civil society — as well as in communication with key political stakeholders, so as to ensure it has a voice and agency in a terrain marked by high levels of political conflict and violence. Its agenda-setting is still marked by holistic demands for inclusion within the wider political reform process, rather than by the prioritizing of concrete women's issues per se — this is also a response designed to help navigate within a field that is rather hostile to women's activism in particular and civil society in general. Looking into JI activism, meanwhile, we can detect that its women are appropriating a gender vocabulary, and thus discursive repertoire, for a different gender-ideological as well as sociopolitical agenda. This conservative spin on gender issues, use of symbolic vocabulary, and choice of strategies represents a counternarrative and practice to the wider women's movement, and thus an additional site of ideological contestation within it.

On the other hand, the Women's Peasant Society was initially characterized by women on the move — as part of a larger political movement rather than as an organization directly rallying around women's issues and concerns. At a later stage their mobilization, awareness-raising, and political participation led them to include gender-specific demands as part of their struggle, combining therein — in Molyneux's terms — both practical and strategic interests. Both female peasant activists and JI ones opt to operate either close to a larger movement or from within a political party (including their own organizational setups), and are thus marked by double militancy and threats of cooptation that might impact on their agenda-setting, agency, and strategizing choices and possibilities.

It remains to be seen if the tragedy of December 16, 2014 will eventually become a watershed event for Pakistani society at large, and for its ideologically — as well as organizationally — fragmented, divided, segmented civil society. After the massacre

of schoolteachers and children in Peshawar on that day, the country came to a standstill for a month or two. It collectively held its breath and wondered how to engage with militants who do not shy away from killing innocent human beings congregating for the purpose of learning — individuals like Malala Yousufzai, who in her fight for child's education, was attacked merely two years earlier. After 12/16, the organized vigils, protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations across the country were in some instances again a demonstration of “performance activism,” with it being divided on organizational and ideological lines. It was also orientated toward the national media's eyes and one's own base, instead of being united in a joint procession and protest for the cause of a universal right — that of education.

In Islamabad, rightwing religious organizations like Jamaat-ud-Dawa drew larger crowds and had more audible loudspeakers than the protest organized by the Aurat Foundation did. In the end, by the beginning of the new year, 2015, only the remains of the wax candles could be seen in front of the Islamabad Press Club, having once been lit by individual citizens, students, civil society activists, political party agents, and others. Some came with banners, some without; regardless, they were ultimately relatively few in numbers — out of fear, some argued. A two-day protest was held at the same time in late 2014 in front of the Red Mosque, one of the perceived epicenters of rightwing jihadism in the very heart of Pakistan's capital — it drew no more than a hundred demonstrators. Barbed wire has been put up on the street, keeping protestors at bay — if they only would and could hold the momentum in terms of stamina, numbers, and cross-sectional solidarity in a context once again marred by political violence within Pakistan's praetorian democracy.

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