

# Women and Social Change in Pakistan



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By

Shehzadi Zamurrad Awan

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Dedicated to Pakistani women for their resilience.



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## PREFACE

Since its inception, the gender debate in the patriarchal/religious society of Pakistan has remained complex, especially concerning male and female socio-cultural placement and their respective contributions in the private and public domains. In the initial years, the country faced the multiple challenges of nation building, which diverted the attention of its leaders from focusing on gender positioning in the newly founded state. However, this negligence later became a strong narrative of state institutions until 1961, when the Muslim Family Law Ordinance (MFLO) was introduced partly under the pressures of women's rights NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and activists. This issue-oriented struggle for women's equal rights in urban areas of the country, in general, and the Punjab province, in particular, continued. The women's rights movement took a turn for the worse when, as a result of General Zia-ul-Haq's diktats, the Hudood Ordinance was enforced, victimizing women in the name of religion, following the interpretation of this military dictator. It was a time when women's NGOs organized themselves and started a comprehensive effort against female victims throughout the tenure of army rule. Going through different phases, the women's rights movement gradually developed its objectives and became an important variable in the socio-cultural positioning of women. Interestingly, this whole struggle for women's rightful position in the country/province was mobilized by elite women from urban areas, which limited the scope and meaning of this struggle. Nevertheless, in recent years, because of increased female education, the mushrooming growth of media (electronic, print, and social) has led to increased awareness in society. The gender debate took a new shape where a comprehensive discussion about female education, employment, and right to marriage, divorce, and inheritance became a part of this discourse. Keeping in view the history of the gender debate in Pakistan, this book concerns the contribution of education, media, political process, women's organizations, and pro-women legislation in transforming the role of Punjabi women, as all these variables have exhibited the capability to play a significant role in the reshaping of gender placement within the socio-cultural paradigm.

While writing this book, I became aware that most of the work on Pakistani women highlighted the issue-based struggle of women's NGOs in

the country. Another significant observation during my study of the available literature revealed the interesting fact that most of the literature is authored by women activists, politicians, or media persons. Their contributions unintentionally overlook prevalent cultural sensitivities and thus miss investigating these variables in detail, which could prompt the empowerment of women. In other words, the milieu in which Pakistani/Punjabi women operate has been sidelined. Moreover, while understanding the change in women's placement, few feminist researchers have discussed education, media, and civil society or legislative and executive measures in their different studies. Before this book, no research had been conducted that dealt simultaneously with the multiple variables that have an impact on women's placement. However, in this book, all variables are discussed in separate chapters. This comprehensive debate on the impact of education, political process, media, civil society, and legislation on the position of women makes this study more interesting and provides an edge over other previously conducted research on Punjabi/Pakistani women. Therefore, I believe, this is a unique study that targets both academic and non-academic readers, across different fields of interest and research.

In this book, I focus on undergraduate young women at college or university to understand how the aspirant young female population views the routine issues they face. The stories, comments, and opinions of these women shared during focus group discussions became an interesting source for my analysis. At the same time, the focus group discussions with young male students were equally eye-opening for me as some of them hardly recognized any gender gap in their surroundings, even in urban society. Moreover, by belonging to the Punjabi rural and urban culture, I felt that I had a better understanding of the spoken and unspoken words and gestures that these young men and women expressed while sharing their experience individually and in group discussions.

I have investigated the change young educated women feel occurs in their private and public lives after being educated and employed. This research attempts to gauge the transformation that pro-women legislation, print/electronic/social media, and civil society have brought for the female population and the extent to which these variables have empowered them to confront the adversities they face. This detailed analysis is an attempt to fathom the improvements that women have achieved in their lives today, as well as the issues and challenges that still hamper their path to achieve equal status and to fulfill their dreams.



## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing debate on women's rights and placement in Pakistani society has faced serious denunciation from some sections of society in one way or another. The criticism over women's struggle for equal rights revolves around a common perception that in Pakistan the privileged westernized elite-class women who raise the slogan of women's empowerment are otherwise alien to the Eastern socio-cultural landscape and religious norms of Pakistani society. It is alleged that being distant individuals, they are neither able to understand the real issues of Pakistani women nor equipped to grasp the cultural dichotomy where they operate. On the contrary, women's rights activists believe that the current pro-women legislation and efforts against injustice for underprivileged females are the result of their long and comprehensive struggle. As an inhabitant of Punjabi society, I feel privileged to have an inside understanding of these dynamics, embedded within cultural norms. Being connected with rural Punjab on my paternal side and by living in urban Punjab, I can understand the cultural similarities and differences between rural and urban environments. As a postgraduate student, I observed the theoretical shift in state policies towards women's rights through legislation, starting in 2006, when General Pervez Musharraf targeted the Hudood Ordinance of Zia-ul-Haq, which amended major clauses through the Women Protection Bill. Although this bill could not bring about a drastic change in the lives of women, it proved to be a departure from the stereotypical gender-biased legislation in previous military regimes and led women's organizations, female politicians, and civil society to demand comprehensive pro-women legislation in the future—at least there was a shift. My daily contact with the young Pakistani generation, my vast experience in teaching, and the response of society towards my writings in newspapers, blogs, and on social-media pages enabled me to understand that legislation alone is not a key player in transforming the role of women in society. There are other important factors, such as education, media, women's organizations, and of course, most importantly, the firm implementation of laws via efficient law-enforcement bodies. These all play a significant role in transforming gender placement in the socio-cultural paradigm. The most interesting part of my study remains that despite the legislation that has been passed on women, the gravity of abuse against women in the domestic and corporate

environment also increased in various ways. There is a counter-narrative to the statement that the increase in media growth might be responsible for highlighting these violations, which previously remained unreported and thus unregistered. Despite this, it can be clearly observed that because of the increasing trend for education among the female population and the slow but growing percentage of the female workforce, women are being exposed to new developments in society. This exposure and empowerment comparatively enables them to take decisions in matters in their lives such as marriage/divorce by choice, selection of profession, and claims over inheritance. However, despite these developments, women are still struggling to make a dent in these sociocultural norms, which even today handicap women in one way or another. I noticed that although educated Punjabi women are able to take initiatives in their personal decisions as compared with the past, they are still paying a heavy price for this “snatched” liberty, as they may face “unannounced” social boycotts from their own families in lieu of the freedom they exercise, even though it is provided by the constitution and religion. In this situation, uneducated and uninformed women from rural and urban backgrounds are more vulnerable. This is not to conclude that men’s role and responsibilities towards women in society should be either undermined or overlooked. Through this study, the attempt is made even to understand those aspects of pro-women legislation, executive measures, women organizations’ efforts, and media struggle that improve the over all status of women in Punjab.

## **Central Theme**

Women’s placement in the changing socio-cultural environment of Pakistan has mostly been discussed in literature from the perspective of women’s rights organizations and female activists. Thus, there is an impression that these studies are biased as they only detail the violation of women’s rights without highlighting successes and progress. Moreover, while evaluating their status in society, the absence of a comprehensive debate over various variables affecting and reshaping women’s position across the classes have never been a part of the discourse. Keeping in view the mentioned discrepancies in the available literature, I intend to explore the affects of modernizing agents like education, media (print, electronic, and social), legislation, executive measures, and civil society in transforming the role of women in Punjab.

## Significance of the Study

In the history of Pakistan, a comprehensive debate over women's placement in society has never taken place. However, from time to time deliberations over women's social, economic, and political rights in some areas have definitely emerged. The terminologies that have commonly been used while explaining women's position in society are restricted to "women's rights" and the "women's movement"; however, in my opinion, in Pakistan not only has there been no countrywide consistent rights struggle encompassing all sections of society but also no movement in its classical sense has ever been initiated to highlight the demands of the female section of society. Nevertheless, in reported cases of abuse and violence, the voices of civil society, especially women's rights organizations, played a vital role. This trend goes back to British India, when in 1937 Muslim Punjabi women attained the right to vote. It is perceived that the awareness of the socio-economic and political rights of Muslim Punjabi women was set in motion right from the days of Pakistan's independence movement as women's participation was endorsed and encouraged by the founder of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his companions. Nevertheless, later events showed that through participation in this way women could neither keep up the necessary momentum nor play an effective role in uplifting the social status of women. This can be attributed to at least two causes. One was that women's involvement in the public sphere was motivated by the struggle to attain an independent state under the guidance of men, for whom empowering women as such was not the intention; rather, their motive was to generate and increase the volume of female participants. The second reason was that only educated urban middle-class women spearheaded the representation of Punjabi women during and after the Pakistan Movement. Thus, rural women of the middle and lower classes remained under-represented. Consequently, the question of how to involve women from all social strata in the campaign to attain equal status in society remained unaddressed, although it was effectively debated at least until the 1980s, notwithstanding the Muslim Family Law Ordinance (MFLO) of 1961.

While examining the history of the women's rights struggle, it must be remembered that in comparison to European and American societies, the struggle started late in Pakistan. The major reasons for this delay and the marginal role of women were ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, along with a high percentage of illiteracy. This phenomenon becomes more complex when examined in terms of rural and urban settings. This intricacy in the emergence of women's rights in Pakistan is further explained by

Professor Amna Imam, “Unlike the West, where once none of the women had the right of inheritance, and where no woman could own property in her name, Pakistani society is a mosaic of rights and obligations. Some women have power, others do not. This explains, at least to some extent, the inception of strong sisterhood and feminism in the West and other homogeneous cultures, and the relative absence of the same unified force in Pakistan” (Imam 2011).

Nevertheless, we should accept that, factually, the peripheral position of women remains a ubiquitous phenomenon throughout the history of humankind, even though some religions acknowledged a few rights of women. Interestingly, the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Babylonia provided women considerable rights compared with the pre-democratic society of Athens, as they could own property, work in different sectors of the economy, and even take part in public life (Thompson 2013). This trend continued throughout the centuries. Conversely, Islam from its advent stressed better treatment for women in all walks of life.<sup>1</sup> It was around the eighteenth century that the debate on women’s rights in different societies started. This development synchronized with the advent of colonial dispensation. Hence, issues such as women’s rights resonated in the colonies. Similarly, although European societies had liberal pretensions, they nonetheless maintained their conservative stance on women’s rights. For example, women’s status before World War I (1914–18) and World War II (1939–45) was confined to domestic chores, where only a few entered the job market under dire necessity. Before 1914 only a few countries, such as New Zealand, Australia, and several Scandinavian nations, had enfranchised women; however, this did not entail that women were fully involved in the political process. In Britain, with some limitations, women got the right to vote in 1918, and in 1928 they were granted equal voting rights.

Similarly, women’s rights movements in America went through three phases. The first phase started in 1840 and led to voting rights for women in 1920; but the demand for gender equality continued and led to the formation of different women’s organizations like the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the National Council of Negro Women. The second phase (1960–80) is considered important in terms of the rise of women’s socio-cultural issues, leading to the formation of the National Organization for Women in 1966. This phase pressurized the government into certain relevant legislation and simultaneously led to the federal

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<sup>1</sup> The Prophet (PBUH) in his last sermon of 632 CE, stated, “O People it is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women but they also have rights over you.”

judiciary pronouncing significant verdicts in related cases. One such example is the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which abolished gender discrimination and granted the right of abortion to women. The third phase (1990–to date) is a continuation of the previous two phases, in which women not only enrolled in academic institutions and entered the job market in large numbers, but also became successfully independent, gaining the right of marriage and inheritance. From America and Europe, the women's rights movement spread to other parts of the world. Still, it took several decades for various governments to introduce appropriate laws, granting rights to women in matters related to property, marriage, employment, and other socio-political matters (Epstein 2002).

While comparing the women's rights demands of Western and American society with that of Pakistan, one universal factor should not be overlooked: that women's demands for their rights differed according to the urgency and values of the respective societies. Moreover, as the global communication system improved and there was more awareness of other societies, the variations transformed into an accepted, comprehensive and unified demand for equal rights.

The intentions and desires of the founding fathers regarding women's status could not materialize because Punjabi society in Pakistan overtly exhibits a patriarchal mindset and its culture continues to adhere to a traditional outlook, which commonly discriminates against women and denies them their rightful place in society. Consequently, women's participation in the social, economic, and political spheres has been curtailed and is heavily dependent on the approval/disapproval of male family members, who continue to dominate all aspects of the decision-making process within the household. According to a study by Hakim and Aziz, a male member of the family dominates the extended family and women in particular. The authors further state, "in Pakistan the extended family is the basic functional unit. Such a family might include the dominant male (usually but not always the eldest) and his wife or wives; his brothers and their wives; his married sons and nephews and their wives; his married sons, daughters, nephews and nieces and, on occasions, other more distant relatives" (Hakim and Aziz 1998, 728). The composition of Pakistani/Punjabi families adheres to the idea of a subservient role for women, who are bound to perform their daily activities as per the wishes and commands of their male family members. Here, it is important to identify that this distinctive socio-cultural setting comes with its own peculiar customs and traditions. Such a definition of the role of women is prevalent not only in Pakistani society. In 1963, an American feminist writer, Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminist Mystique* debated the regressive value system in American

society through which women's position is defined, stating that, "their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They have no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions" (Friedan 2013, 5). Friedan's explanation that women suffered under a pervasive system of delusion and false values can also be applied to Punjabi/Pakistani society, in which women are forced to find or locate their personal fulfillment and even identity vicariously through their husbands and children. Even in the twenty-first century, women are expected to devote their lives to their husbands and children; thus, they are conditioned to feel satisfied only when accepted as obedient daughters, sisters, and dutiful mothers/wives.

Pakistani/Punjabi society shares various features of a peculiar nature. First is the tribal/*baradari* system,<sup>2</sup> which is governed by exclusive traditions and norms deeply entrenched in the culture of the land. The tribal/*baradari* system grants a dominant status to the eldest male member of the family, who is responsible for all important decisions. In such an environment, women's status remains subservient to the will of the family patriarch. This gender discrimination is more evident in the rural areas compared with urban centers. The main reasons for this are a lack of formal education, limited access to print/electronic media, the inaccessibility of civil society organizations, and controlled participation in the political process. These hindrances compel women to play a secondary role to their male family members, despite being actively involved in manual labor, that is, in addition to their full participation in household activities. Consequently, women's participation in every sphere of life has been curtailed and they remain at the mercy of men and their consciously designed norms and ethos. Another interesting aspect of defining women as "other" is explained by French feminist and social theorist Simone de Beauvoir in her book "*The Second Sex*": "Woman? Very simple, say those who like answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet 'female' sound like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: 'He's a male!'" (Beauvoir 2011, 21). This

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<sup>2</sup> *Baradari* means "brotherhood," originating from the Persian word *baradar* meaning "brother." In Pakistan and India it is used to denote a number of social strata among South Asian Muslims. The Hindu caste system influenced South Asian Muslims and resulted in the formation of "brotherhood" or communities that shared social stratification. Hindus of different castes who converted to Islam due to Sufi missionaries formed their own *baradaris*. Tribal and clan affiliations are also considered *biradaris* in Pakistan.

explanation also corresponds well with the attitude of Punjabi society towards women, as a belief exists that the generative composition of the female body drains her energies to the level that she is incapable of competing with men, resulting in discrimination against women at home and even in workplaces.

The second feature of Pakistani/Punjabi society is the deep impact of Islam as Muslims make up about 97 percent of the total population of the country. The rigid interpretation of Islamic injunctions by the religious orthodoxy, who are mostly semi-educated, has further confined the role of women. However, according to various scholars of repute, Islam acknowledges the equal status of men and women. In Pakistani/Punjabi society, there is little distinction left between culture and religion, which overlaps to the extent that it is difficult to differentiate between the two. According to Singhal and Ikramullah, the culture and traditions of the Pakistani people are a blend of continued adherence to Hindu values and customs. On the other hand, the values and traditions of Islam brought by migrants and conquerors have a considerable impact on the habits and traditions of the people. The practice of seclusion of a woman (*purdah*) as a status symbol and her exclusion from male-oriented work has overshadowed the Islamic traditions of providing due consideration to women, in matters of inheritance, approval of marriage, right to divorce (*khula*), and freedom to own an independent business. Theoretically, orthodoxy in Pakistan gives the impression of adhering to religious injunctions; however, in practice, most of the time the orthodox prefer customs originating from centuries-old non-Muslim traditions, no matter that it contradicts Islamic laws (Ikramullah 1963, 160; Singhal 1972, 11–12).

The third feature is the existence of different social classes, which can be broadly defined as an upper class,<sup>3</sup> middle class,<sup>4</sup> and lower class.<sup>5</sup> There are variations within the classes, as well. Cultural values have a more-or-

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<sup>3</sup> The upper class is a group of people at the top of a socio-economic hierarchy. Members of an upper class may have considerable power over the allocation of resources and governmental policies.

<sup>4</sup> The middle class is broadly defined as those consisting of educated technocrats, army officers, senior bureaucrats, merchants, and landlords. In socio-economic terms, the middle class is the broad group of people in a society who fall socio-economically between the working class and the upper class.

<sup>5</sup> The lower class occupies the lowest socio-economic position in a society. Another term for “lower class” is “working class,” who are employed in lower tier jobs (as measured by skill, education, and lower incomes, like laborers and peasants); the term is often extended to those who are unemployed or are otherwise in possession of below-average material wealth.

less equal impact on the lives of people belonging to different classes, which ultimately determines women's status in society. Upper-class women are generally educated, with access to all available resources, and are more empowered to guard their rights, mainly because of awareness and a strong financial position. However, in some cases, even the women of this stratum are a victim of strong prejudices, from tribal or *baradari* base structures. For example, twenty-seven-year-old Samia Sarwar, the daughter of a prominent businessman and head of the Chamber of Commerce, was shot in 1999 in her attorneys' Lahore office by a gunman hired by her family because she was in the process of seeking a divorce from her estranged husband. Similarly, women belonging to the middle class are handicapped in voicing their demands for empowerment. Serious hindrances exist in their free mobility and at times obstacles are created to prevent them from accessing the higher education of their choice. This class is regarded as the custodian of the existing cultural and religious values of society. The most vulnerable women are those of the lower class, as they neither have the resources to challenge the prejudices and violations they encounter nor are they aware of their basic rights. In this situation, the question of equal status with men is a far-fetched reality.

Keeping in view the mentioned features of Pakistani/Punjabi society, it becomes imperative to understand comprehensively the placement of women, highlighting discrimination and issues of gender inequality and its variations along with various dimensions of women's empowerment. These aspects of Pakistani/Punjabi women's lives have been supplemented with relevant arguments by national and international scholars. In this research, an attempt is made to derive the inner sentiments of the key concerns of Punjabi women through group discussions, supported by a detailed survey from pre-graduate university students. The issues mentioned are reflected in the relevant chapters of this book.

At this juncture, I would like to point out that education, print/electronic media (newspaper articles, documentaries, and talk shows), social networking websites (like Facebook, Twitter, orkut, hi5, Google+), various administrative and legislative measures (in the shape of ordinances, bills, and laws), the awareness efforts of non-governmental organizations (pamphlets, newsletters, training workshops, and street theater), and political process (elections and representation) serve as principal agents of change for any society. I will further examine Punjabi society, taking into consideration the level of impact these mentioned agents have in the uplift and empowerment of women and the transformation of the patriarchal structure of society. However, my research will point out the magnitude of its uneven impact in urban and rural contexts because in both cases the

effects of these agents differ. It is pertinent to mention that the hinted agents of change were not effective enough in the initial stage of Pakistani history; rather, their presence and consequent impact is gradually felt in society.

It is a known fact that the women's rights struggle decayed during Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977–88), which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The historical evidence suggests that even after the end of the dictatorial rule of Zia-ul-Haq, the long spells of democratic rule by Nawaz Sharif (1990–93, 1997–99) and Benazir Bhutto (1988–90, 1993–96) made little effort to amend the draconian laws of the previous regime, despite the continuous efforts of civil society organizations. Beside this, I will consider the role of modernizing agents through the improvement of the female literacy rate and the acceptability of women employees in the job market, leading to the question of why the agenda of enlightened moderation by Pervez Musharraf (1999–2002) could not ensure notable improvements to the status of women. Nevertheless, it is presumed that the Musharraf regime managed to amend some despised clauses of the Hudood Ordinance along with increasing the ratio of women in all represented bodies and enacting certain laws to protect women's rights, as discussed in Chapter 4. The urgency of women-related legislation continued during the uninterrupted ten years of democratic rule (2008–13, 2013–18) by the "liberal" People's Party and "conservative" Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz government. In this area, my research focus is not only to evaluate the legislative and executive measures of various governments but also to study the placement of women in a much wider societal perspective, notwithstanding that the enactment of laws and other measures by the government does make a difference. The empowerment of women is closely related to the impact of various agents of change and the receiving capabilities of the Punjabi female population. However, it becomes essential to examine the level of correlation between the agents of change and the change itself among the female population of Punjab. Alongside that, it is necessary to comprehend the extent to which the female population responded to the change, as the impact of the agents varies from case to case and issue to issue.

## **Research Milieu**

As a social scientist, I have closely observed and studied the socio-cultural dynamics of Pakistani society. As hinted above, by spending my childhood in a rural setting and my academic/professional life in the urban setting of the country's largest province in terms of population, I closely observed the growing trend of education among the female population, the increased awareness among women about their rights, the state reaction to gender

inequality in the shape of legislation, which sensitized the media and mobilized civil society against female abuse. These trends on one side reiterate a changed milieu for women but at the same time present different types of challenges for them. These developments have not decreased the challenges for Pakistani/Punjabi women but have led to the challenges taking on a new shape. My daily interaction with young male and female students not only keeps me informed about the issues they confront but also helps me understand their apprehensions regarding their placement within a changing societal environment. For me the interesting part of this debate is that young male students (most of them with a rural background) even in elite colleges and universities are unable even to accept the gender gap, particularly in an urban setting. They argue that urban women do have the liberty to get an education and even to join the job market. Secondly, they point out that various pieces of legislation have empowered women to approach courts of law in case of gender-related rights violations. Whenever I initiated this discussion, it was an uphill task to make the men realize that the invisible chains of the socio-cultural set-up are at times more powerful than cosmetic liberty. Women commonly are conditioned to react in a certain way and whenever they try to respond differently, society is hesitant to accept them.

Since 2008, the continuity of democratic governments in Pakistan has opened new avenues and hopes for Pakistani women as they expect that democratic rulers have a mandate to address inequalities against the female population through legislative and executive measures. This impression was further confirmed when serious legislative steps dealing with core socio-political issues of the female population were initiated by the democratic governments of the Pakistan People's Party and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) in national and provincial assemblies. For me, the most exciting part was that a debate began between traditionalists and modernists over such efforts. This not only highlighted the new dimension of arguments on women's rights but also pointed out the mature nature of women's struggle in conservative Pakistani society. According to my observation, although new legislation set a unique pattern by ensuring comparatively more rights to women, it still lacked the proper and relevant mechanisms required for fruitful change. For example, in 2015, the Protection of Women against Violence Bill was passed in Punjab, whereas, on the federal level, the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act was passed in 2012. The legislation ensures women's safety but the procedure mentioned in this legislation is tedious, making things virtually impractical. For instance, keeping in view a socio-cultural environment in which even to discuss abuse by a husband often results in unilateral divorce, how can it be expected that

women will be vocal about domestic mistreatment. It is relevant to point out here that the sharing of such information by a grieved party is not approved of even by near relatives as according to a reasonable number of people in Pakistani society, such abuse is considered a “normal practice.” Similarly, on-air reports about abuse and violence against women gain viewer ratings, but when it comes to the analysis of such news stories, a sizeable number of those individuals both male and female consider murdering a woman in the name of honor to be a “justified” act. When I investigated the impact of the agents of change, a common trend that I came across was the growth of extremist thought in Pakistan, which envisages a confined role for women in society, and which has thus disturbed the social equilibrium. This trend has widened the gap between conservatives and modernists. The unfortunate part of this discourse is that it links gender inequality with religion by presenting without context interpretations of Qur’anic verses. During my field research, I observed that due to education, media, civil society campaigns, and legislative measures by the government, though women today are more aware of their rights compared with in the past, in cases of violation, for women the mechanism to register protest is either unavailable or difficult to access, which subsequently leaves limited spaces for them to raise their voices. I witnessed that, on one side, due to education, media, legislation, and civil society, women have been provided opportunities for development, resulting in an upgrading of their financial position. Yet on the other side, they are socially dependent on a male or chauvinistic set-up in one way or another as their position is measured through various other variables like age, marital status, and childbearing (with preferences for a son). These uneven patterns of change in the lives of Punjabi women are thoroughly discussed in later chapters of my book.

### **Representation/Otherness**

During my research, I noticed that the literature on Pakistani women highlighted the issue-oriented rights struggle in the country, in which female status has been evaluated through legal and political prisms. Another significant observation revealed that most of the literature available on the women of Pakistan in the shape of research articles and books is written by either women activists or politicians. Although these works delicately touch on various aspects of women’s placement in society, they unintentionally either present the grievances of women while overlooking the cultural sensitivities of society or are the views of authors who belong to a privileged class with a foreign education who only take a cursory look, without going deeper into the problem. In other words, the milieu in which Pakistani/Punjabi

women operate has been sidelined. Moreover, while understanding the change in women's placement, few feminist researchers have focused exclusively on modernizing agents such as education, media, civil society, and legislative and executive measures.

In the case of Punjab, while evaluating women's position in a province with comparatively reasonable provision for education and health facilities and where media is vibrant and civil society organizations are wide-spread, I focused on undergraduate university women to understand how this aspirant young female population looks toward gender issues. The stories, comments, and opinions that university women shared with me during focus group discussions became an interesting source for my analysis. At the same time, the focus group discussions with young university male students also was an eye-opener for me as some of them hardly recognized any gender gap in urban society. Moreover, by belonging to the Punjabi rural and urban culture, I felt that I had a better understanding of the spoken and unspoken words and gestures that these young university men and women expressed while sharing their experience with me and in a group.

## **Data Collection Scheme and Design**

In Pakistan, most research on women focuses on gender-rights violations particularly from the perspective of women's NGOs, which are dominated by upper-middle-class privileged women. The literature ignores various variables (education, media, and legislation) and dynamics of contemporary Punjabi society, which play a vital role in reshaping the status and placement of women in society. Women constitute 48.76 percent of the Pakistani population and the female population of Punjab, being the most populous province, is proportionally representative. This female population is not only politically marginalized but also struggling socio-economically. It is difficult for women to find the right space for themselves, especially in an environment where, on one side, orthodoxy is already well-entrenched among voters, while, on the other, in the international forum, Pakistan is a signatory to various covenants to ensure gender equality. Nevertheless, a wide gap exists between theoretical commitment in international forums and its practical manifestation in a country. Realizing this situation, I believe that a country where women make up half of the population cannot progress without ensuring equal opportunities for both genders.

While reviewing the literature on gender in Pakistan, as hinted before, I observed that most contributions are either by female activists, who are attached to a women's organization, or by female politicians, who write about gender discrimination from the perspective of their own experiences

in legislative houses. Thus, the views presented in their writings somewhere lack the voices of those middle- and lower-class women, who not only are the usual victims of abuse and violence but also have no platform to express the gravity of their pain and suffering. There was a scarcity of books written by academics; therefore, for me, the real test was to understand the situation by avoiding relying on only one perspective of the situation. This challenge also became a source of inspiration for me, as it motivated me to gauge the placement of Pakistani/Punjabi women from an academic perspective, a departure from the views already presented by women's rights organizations and female politicians. Nevertheless, for this kind of analysis, my basic source of information was available books and research articles on the gender issue. For me, to control this data was a difficult task. Therefore, on the basis of previously conducted studies, I identified five separate themes, spotlighting the status of women in the Pakistani/Punjabi context. In the first theme, I grouped those books and research articles that dealt with the progression of women's status, in various societies, particularly those in the developing nations. In the second theme, the data related to the placement of women in the socio-cultural environment of Pakistan with its reflection on the province of Punjab. In the third theme, material regarding the conventional economic and political placement of Punjabi women in Pakistani/Punjabi society and the emerging changes in their status was discussed. The fourth theme brought together data related to the role of state institutions towards women's issues through legislative and executive measures. In the fifth theme, books and articles regarding the role of agents of change—education, political process, media, and civil society organizations—in transforming the placement of Punjabi women were clustered. A detailed review of the mentioned literature on these themes is contained in the first chapter. Across all these themes, I observed that few books or articles comprehensively debate the impact of selected agents of change on women's placement in Pakistan. This scarcity further motivated me to conduct this research.

As I have mentioned above, on women's issues, the majority of books and articles are written by female activists; therefore, I decided to visit the two leading women's organizations in Punjab, Shirkat Gah and the Auart Foundation. These organizations' vast resources on women's issues helped me in various ways. They provided me with newsletters, news-sheets, progress reports, annual reports, brochures, conference reports, and books, as well as multi-media items produced and documented by them in Urdu and English. The analysis of the mentioned material helped me understand the role of these organizations in highlighting women's problems in the country, particularly in Punjab. Moreover, I was able to comprehend that

most of their data were responses to various issues like women's right to inheritance, underage marriage, honor killing, domestic violence, etc. Nevertheless, the provided material lacks a comprehensive debate over the role of improved literacy, employment opportunities for women, and elaborated gender legislation as a safeguard against all types of rights violations. This gap became a third motivation for my research. To fill this gap, I interviewed the focal person from these organizations and asked those questions that remained unaddressed in their literature but was significant for my analysis of the role of women's organizations as an important agent of change in the transformation of women's placement.

During my research, while tracing the historical position of women in Pakistani/Punjabi society, I was often asked what gaps I was able to find and how my work would fill them in the books, articles, and reports on gender, especially on the discriminatory Hudood Ordinance during Zia-ul-Haq's rule. I noticed that the existing literature neglected two aspects. One is that they have not persistently utilized original sources for analysis. Therefore, I targeted the original sources by visiting Urdu and English newspaper archives and special collections of libraries. I made a list of events organized by female activists and located them in leading newspapers. I used news, editorials, articles, special interviews, and reports published in the *Pakistan Times*, *Zamindar*, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, the *Civil and Military Gazette*, *Inqalab*, and *Dawn* from 1947 to the present. In this regard, Punjab University Library, Quaid-e-Azam Library, Punjab Public Library, and the Dyal Singh Library proved to be excellent resource centers. Another interesting collection I came across in Punjab University Library was the well-preserved monthly volumes of *Jamaat-i-Islami* magazine, *Tarjuman-ul-Quran*, in which the debate over women's status in an Islamic state further enabled me to understand the views of orthodoxy regarding women's struggle. These original sources helped me strengthen my arguments. During my research, the time spent in newspaper archives was most memorable. I felt that the women's struggle for the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961 and their protest against the Hudood Ordinance was directly corresponding with me and taking me back in history, where every reported word in the newspaper reflected the momentum in women's efforts for recognition of their status as an equal gender. The sources that I most enjoyed were Urdu language newspapers and magazines, as the language has a peculiar influence because it is used and understood by all citizens of the country, irrespective of the ethnic group they belong to. Moreover, there was more coverage from local sources in vernacular sources. The response of orthodoxy to women's protest and sit-ins for their rights was equally interesting as the expressions religious