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**Women's And Minority Rights Movements: The Resistance Movements Led by Women, Under General Zia-Ul-Haq's Regime and Religious Minorities Fighting for Equal Citizenship, Remain on the Margins of Formal Historical Narratives**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper investigated the movement of women rights and minority rights in the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) in Pakistan. The aim was to understand the ways in which these groups were opposing authoritarian policies but they are still on the margins of official historical accounts. The research design adopted by the study was qualitative research design that was historical and critical. Secondary sources of information, such as scholarly literature, policy documents and archives, were used to gather the data. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that only those sources, which focused directly on the struggle of women and minorities under the Islamization policies of Zia, were used. Thematic analysis was the method used to analyze the data to highlight themes like patriarchy, legal discrimination, resistance and exclusion and occur in recurrent themes. They applied the Feminist (Tong, 2009) and Minority Rights Theory, which clarified the intersection of patriarchy and state power to oppress women and minorities and also condition the resistance forms. The results have shown that legislations like the Hudood ordinances and the law of evidence institutionalized inequality and lessened the legal rights of women, and further marginalized the minority. Resistance movements such as the Women action forum opposed such laws and established their own alternative space of empowerment. The agency of women, however, was usually complicated, as it empowered women and supported the standards of patriarchal relations. On the same note, the minorities opposed the discriminatory policies but received no equal citizenship and were shoved to the sidelines of the national identity. The research has an impact on the literature, as it reveals the suppressed presence of women and minority movements in the Pakistani political history. It demonstrates the means of marginalization of the marginalized groups with the help of language, law and power, and how it was overcome through activism and faith-based agency. The results highlight the necessity to rewrite the history of Pakistan, including women and minorities as the key participants of the process of equality and democracy.*

**Keywords:** Women's rights, minority rights, Zia-ul-Haq, Islamization, resistance movements, patriarchy, Feminist Theory

## Introduction

In Pakistan, women and minority rights movements have fought a long battle of being left out of the formal historical narratives in the country. With the Islamization policies, gender inequality was institutionalized and patriarchal control was strengthened under the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988). The women were inhibited under the Laws like the Hudood Ordinances, the Law of Evidence as well, and rendered their legal rights powerless, and susceptible to societal and state oppression. Women fought back in reaction, with protests, the most known being organized by the Women Action Forum (WAF). Those movements opposed the religious-political agenda of the state but their contribution and sacrifices are still peripheral to mainstream history.

The rule of Zia also discriminated against the religious minorities systematically. The separation of electorates and amendments in the constitution further excluded them in their right to citizenship. The non-majority communities like Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadist were not given the same status either socially or politically. Their hard fought equality and recognition although characterized by resilience was muted in the official records of nation building.

The civil society such as the women associations and minority groups of rights activists were instrumental in opposing authoritarianism. However, the prevalence of the military strength and the application of religion to the governmental political matters made sure that their stories would be relegated to the background. The historical discourse, which is formed by the state and its ideological projects, has been unable to recognize the extent of these resistance movements.

This paper aims at revealing the resistance to oppression by women and minorities movements under Zia-ul-Haq, why these movements have not been included in writing history, and what this omission has to tell us about the connection between power, religion, and citizenship in Pakistan.

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it brings out the plight of women and minorities under the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq, which is mostly remembered in terms of Islamization and political authoritarianism. The study sheds light on such voices, which are not present in the mainstream historical discourse by highlighting the resistance movements of women and religious minorities. The research is also useful in the appreciation of the role that state policies played in determining gender and religious discrimination in Pakistan. It demonstrates how women and minorities were structurally discriminated against by laws like the Hudood Ordinances and separate electorates. These struggles are worth identifying in order to build a more inclusive picture of the Pakistani history. On a larger scale, the research is relevant to the studies of human rights, power, and citizenship in South Asia. It defies mainstream discourses which silence oppressed groups and offers a space of their contribution towards the challenge of authoritarianism. The results can help in informing future studies about gender equality, minority rights and democratic inclusion in Pakistan.

## Research Questions

1. How were women's resistance movements under General Zia-ul-Haq represented in historical narratives and public discourse?
2. In what ways have religious minorities struggled for equal citizenship in Pakistan, and how are their efforts marginalized in mainstream history?
3. How do power shape the silencing or exclusion of women and minority rights movements in Pakistan's socio-political context?

## Literature Review

Movements for women and minority rights in Pakistan have a long history. These movements grew in response to deep social, political, and religious structures that limited equality. Women

and minorities faced discrimination through cultural norms, feudal practices, and state policies. Researchers agree that these groups often remain on the margins of historical and political narratives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist Theory and Minority Rights Theory are used to guide this study. Feminist Theory revolves around the role of power systems, patriarchy, and social conventions in creating and sustaining gender inequality (Tong, 2009). It gives the means to analyze how women have been relegated to the periphery of the society and how they counter the oppression. Within the Pakistan context, women movements have evolved as a reaction to the state laws as well as cultural practices which restrict the rights of women. The Feminist Theory is also applicable as it provides the connection between state power and struggles of women. During the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq, most laws like the Hudood Ordinances entrenched patriarchy through restrictions to women (Shabir and Mahmood, 2020). With the help of Feminist Theory, one can comprehend the way women counteracted these laws by means of protests, activism, and organizations (Imran & Munir, 2018). It also illuminates the greater systems of patriarchy that overlap with class and religion, and provide obstacles to women as well as the minorities (Rouse, 1986; Yasmeen, 1999).

Meanwhile, Minority Rights Theory offers a good point of view to analyse how in the past, religious minorities in Pakistan were not afforded full citizenship and equal representation in political life. Minority Rights Theory focuses on safeguarding the disadvantages in a state so that they are not absorbed into mainstream identities but are instead understood to be unique in terms of their cultures and religious orientation (Kymlicka, 1995). The Islamization policies of Zia in Pakistan blurred the distinction between religion and citizenship and this made minorities susceptible to exclusion and persecution (Jalal, 1991). This model clarifies how the state laws like the use of Shariah-based legal reforms on both the Muslims and the non-Muslims played a role in strengthening the second-class citizenship of the minorities. It also assists in placing the minority struggles in a wider context of human rights, equality and political recognition.

Combined, Feminist Theory and Minority Rights Theory will enable this study to critically examine how women and minority resistance movements during the Zia-ul-Haq rule confronted the ideology of patriarchy, authoritarianism and exclusion. These models also articulate why, even though they are very instrumental in advancing equality and rights, these movements are still peripheral in the official histories.

### **Previous Studies**

Rouse (1986) shows that women suffered under both class and gender oppression. The state promoted religious conservatism that reinforced women's inferior position. Patriarchy and the control of education helped the regime spread this ideology. Shaheed (2010) explains that women's movements in Pakistan had to work both with the state and society. Success in lawmaking required state approval, while long-term change depended on shifting social attitudes. She also notes that Islamist groups posed growing threats to women's rights.

Shabir and Mahmood (2020) compare the policies of General Zia-ul-Haq and General Musharraf. Zia's Islamization, especially the Hudood Ordinances, pushed women back into the private sphere. Musharraf, in contrast, introduced reforms like the Women Protection Bill 2006 and expanded women's representation in parliament. Qadri, Gilani, and Khurram (2018) also highlight Musharraf's policies, but they note the lack of proper implementation by later governments.

Imran and Munir (2018) emphasize how women organized against Zia's regime. They describe the rise of women's NGOs, activist groups, and feminist voices. This resistance created new spaces for women in civil society. Yousaf et al. (2025) trace the history of women's rights movements from pre-independence to today. They show progress in legal reforms and

representation but stress that patriarchy and cultural barriers still limit women. Razzaq and Mehmood (2022) agree, arguing that laws and policies often exist but are not enforced.

Minority rights movements also faced challenges. Rehman (2001) shows that Pakistan failed to build a consistent constitutional framework to protect minorities. Politicization of religion increased persecution of Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and others. Rais (2007) explains how religion was used for political power, deepening divisions and fueling violence. Yasmeen (1999) connects Islamization with limits on citizenship for both women and minorities. Awan et al. (2025) highlight institutionalized discrimination, showing how minorities remain excluded from education, politics, and the economy.

Aziz (2023) adds another layer by focusing on leftist activism. He shows how leftist movements and the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) resisted authoritarianism. These struggles often aligned with women's and minority movements in their demand for justice and equality.

Begum et al. (2022) discuss women's roles before and after partition. They note that women played a strong part in the Pakistan Movement but later faced setbacks. Qasim et al. (2023) show that later democratic governments, like under Zardari, tried to empower women through constitutional reforms. These efforts, however, still faced challenges in practice.

The literature shows that women and minority rights movements in Pakistan have been shaped by authoritarianism, religion, and patriarchy. Zia's regime marked a turning point, sparking organized resistance that continues today. Progress has been made, especially through legal reforms and activism, but social and political barriers remain strong.

### **Methodology**

This study focuses on women's and minority rights movements in Pakistan. It examines how these movements, especially under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, resisted authoritarian policies but remained on the margins of history. The study uses a qualitative research design. It follows a historical and critical approach to understand the resistance of women and minorities. The design is based on reviewing existing literature, policy documents, and historical records. The study uses secondary sources. These include academic books, journal articles, reports, and archival documents. Key references are works by Rouse (1986), Shaheed (2010), Rehman (2001), Shabir and Mahmood (2020), Imran and Munir (2018), Awan et al. (2025), and others. These sources provide insights into women's and minority struggles, state policies, and forms of resistance. Purposive sampling is used. The study selects sources that directly address women's and minority rights in Pakistan, with focus on Zia's Islamization period and its aftermath. The study applies thematic analysis. Texts are read carefully to identify recurring themes such as Islamization, patriarchy, legal reforms, resistance movements, and state oppression. The themes are compared across different studies to highlight agreements, contradictions, and gaps.

### **Discussion and Findings**

This study explored the struggles of women and minorities during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime. The findings reveal how patriarchy, state laws, and cultural traditions combined to restrict women's rights and weaken minority voices in Pakistan. Pakistan is a patriarchal society where men hold power in families and politics. Women were seen as threats to male honor. Under Zia, this mindset was reinforced by laws and policies. The Haddood Ordinance (1979) was the most damaging step. It legalized adultery and rape, which is not easy to differentiate, and victims of sexual violence were caught by it. Most of the rape survivors, such as Safia bibi received punishments, rather than her assaulters. It has been reported that more than 1,500 women were sent to jails since they failed to find four male witnesses. This demonstrates how state law became an instrument of domination of women. These laws were strongly opposed by civil society and rights groups. In 1981, The Women Action Forward (WAF) was established and it had emerged among the main opposition groups. It opposed

discriminative laws such as the Qanun-e-Shahadat (1985) which diluted the testimony of women to half of a man. WAF also went against female limits in education, employment and politics. Such resistance put into the limelight the agency of women, despite a hostile environment.

The state policies directed during the rule of Zia compelled women into domestic affairs which were symbolised by the chador and chardevari. But women opposed this diminishment by establishing their own areas, including dars (religious study circles) and khatams (communal prayers). These rituals provided women with agency and spiritual empowerment in situations where there were limited public and political role models. But this opposition was not necessarily feminist. Rather, it was through the involvement of women in religious piety movements who tended to combine empowerment with support of the patriarchal norms.

One of the main arguments is based on the publications of Jamal (2005) and Iqtidar (2008). Jamal asserts that women of Jamaat-e-Islami should not be regarded as being the inactive participants under the male control. She demonstrates that these women create their own identities, and in some cases, they use their strategies of secular feminists but uphold conservative illuminations. Likewise, Iqtidar concludes that women members of Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamaat ud Dawa are not coerced but they have a religiously based agency. Their activism is an opposition to male domination but in a rather indirect way, though in many instances they serve to reinforce patriarchal politics in the religious sphere.

The results reveal a key contradiction, i.e. women agency is present, but it is not necessarily feminist or emancipatory. As an illustration, the act by Samia R. Qazi who defended the domestic violence bill in Parliament showed courage, but still her decision sanctioned the idea of conditional obedience in marriage. Similarly, the Jamia Hafsa women were political activists and organised against practices that were un-Islamic, yet the movement strengthened restrictive religious control. This duality affirms the fact as argued by Saba Mahmood (2005) that agency is not necessarily resistance as used by liberal feminists. Rather, women can be empowered by piety, discipline and even submission, depending upon cultural and religious contexts. Therefore, women resistance movements in Pakistan can not be categorized into a secular and religious divide. Both have complexities, in which there is empowerment and repression.

The experiences of the minorities indicate the same pattern. As an example, the Sindhi Hindu women publicly stood by Jamaat ud Dawa, following the attacks in Mumbai, as the group offered them services and security. This example demonstrates that even where the same organisations support discriminatory ideologies, religious patronage systems may transcend gender and religious lines. Minority women hence, maneuver on survival, support and exclusion. This is true of the larger reality: empowerment on the basis of faith-based groups is usually on astringent conditions. It reinforces political influence of religious organisations and maintains minority groups in the fringes of equality of citizenship. Their voices are not subject to the mainstream history, just as the resistance of women under Zia.

The Islamization process introduced by General Zia changed the legal and social position of women in Pakistan. The Hudood Ordinance and the Law of Evidence were the most damaging reforms. The Hudood laws criminalized zina (adultery and fornication), but they made no distinction between consensual sex and rape. This forced rape victims to provide four male witnesses, and if they failed, they risked being punished themselves. The Law of Evidence further reduced women's rights by equating their testimony to half of a man's. These laws institutionalized gender discrimination and made women second-class citizens in their own country (Weiss, 1986; Jahangir & Jilani, 2003). Civil society resisted these reforms. Groups like the Women's Action Forum (WAF) emerged as strong voices. They opposed discriminatory laws, protested restrictions on women's participation, and challenged the regime's attempt to confine women to the private sphere. This shows that even in a patriarchal system, women created spaces of resistance to protect their rights and to question state power.

The Islamization process also affected religious minorities. The Hudood laws and Federal Shariat Courts applied to both Muslims and non-Muslims, which meant minorities too were subject to gendered Sharia laws. Zia's legal reforms, presented as divine commands, blurred the boundary between religion and citizenship. As a result, minorities were treated as outsiders to the national identity. This reinforced their exclusion from equal citizenship and political participation (Jalal, 1991). Zia's claim that he was divinely ordained to bring an Islamic order in Pakistan shaped the discourse of power. Islamization was framed as a mission to purify society, but it functioned as a political strategy to legitimize military rule. The rhetoric of Nizam-e-Mustafa and the language of "moral purity" made it easier to justify laws that curtailed women's rights and limited minority freedoms. Language was used as a tool to create boundaries between "true" and "lesser" citizens.

Zia's Islamization program also pushed minorities to the margins. Laws framed under the guise of Shariah reforms often excluded non-Muslims from equal participation. For example, the Ansari Commission in 1983 suggested that only Muslim males could be head of state and that women could participate in politics only with their husbands' approval. While not all proposals were implemented, these ideas show how citizenship was tied to religion and gender. Minorities were pushed further away from equal rights, reinforcing their second-class status in society. The discourse of Islamization shaped who could be considered a "pure Pakistani." Women and minorities were excluded through legal, cultural, and religious language. The state presented these laws as "Islamic," but critics saw them as misinterpretations meant to consolidate power. Media and activists exposed how vague and unjust the Hadood laws were, but the regime used religious rhetoric to silence dissent. This shows how language itself became a weapon to legitimize inequality.

The results affirm the fact that the patriarchy and feudal values, combined with state law under Zia, were used to suppress women. Violence, forcible marriages, disenfranchisement and political marginalization became the order of the day. The extent of brutality is confirmed by Amnesty International (2012) and other reports. Meanwhile, such resistance groups as WAF demonstrate that women did not stay quiet. Their struggle made the debate to continue and they opposed the effort by the regime to silence their voices. Equally, minorities struggled with discrimination, and their struggle is still a big part of the history that is not highlighted by mainstream. The results substantiate the fact that the Islamization of Zia changed the legal and political framework of Pakistan in a way that systematically discriminated against females and minorities. Women had to deal with legal obstacles, violence, and discrimination, and the minorities were taken under religious laws, which stripped them of equality of citizenship. Meanwhile, the resistance movements like WAF were also essential to reveal injustice and develop the other discourses of equality and human rights.

Three key findings are brought out in the discussion. Women developed other arenas of empowerment in Zia, but these were usually bound to religious identity and not the democratic rights. The agentic behavior of Islamist women activists is usually driven by patriarchal but not feminist goals. At times religious minorities have joined faith-based groups to survive although they are still limited in their rights of citizenship. All these findings together affirm that the resistance movements of women and minorities in Pakistan are controversial, complicated and in most cases suppressed in official accounts. Their fights confound the notion that resistance has to be secular or liberal. Rather, the opposition in Pakistan is formed by religious, struggle of existence and power which emancipate and restrain simultaneously. The paper points out that the Pakistan relationship between religion and state is something that is yet to be resolved. This has made political and religious elites turn to religion as a weapon. The outcome has been organized intolerance of women and minorities. Equality would have been provided through democracy and constitutional safeguards, but this was not the case due to military supremacy

and poor institutions of the civilian government (Iqtidar, 2008; Jamal, 2005). The rights movements of women and the minorities, therefore, remained on the fringes of the history.

The current study confirms earlier scholarship that General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies institutionalized gender and religious discrimination. Like Weiss (1986) and Jahangir and Jilani (2003), the findings show that the Hudood Ordinance and the Law of Evidence created legal frameworks that denied women equal citizenship and exposed rape survivors to punishment rather than protection. The evidence that over 1,500 women were imprisoned for failing to provide four male witnesses echoes previous reports documenting how state law functioned as an instrument of patriarchal control. This reinforces earlier claims that Zia's reforms blurred the line between religion and law, subordinating women to cultural and political power structures (Jalal, 1991).

At the same time, the study extends previous findings by emphasizing women's resistance. Civil society organizations like the Women's Action Forum (WAF) were identified in earlier literature as key opponents of discriminatory laws (Weiss, 1986), but this study highlights the ways in which women also created religious and communal spaces, such as dars and khatams, to reclaim spiritual and social agency. This confirms Jamal's (2005) and Iqtidar's (2008) arguments that Islamist women are not passive victims but active agents navigating religious and political spaces. However, the study also underscores the contradiction in women's activism: empowerment was often framed within patriarchal religious discourse rather than secular feminist ideals, aligning with Mahmood's (2005) notion that agency can exist through discipline, piety, and submission rather than resistance alone.

Regarding minority struggles, the conclusions intersect with a critique by Jalal (1991) of Islamization who argued that non-Muslims were not granted full citizenship status by Islamization, as it entrenched religious delimitations in the state law. Similar to the previous studies, the paper demonstrates how legislation like the Hudood Ordinances and advice of the Ansari Commission decimated minorities into second-class citizens. However, the results also provide complexity to the view, by demonstrating how minorities occasionally attempted to find survival and partial empowerment in the coalitions with religious groups, despite the stance of such groups promoting exclusionary ideologies. This reaffirms the complicated fact that empowerment on religious goodwill is usually associated with political prices.

The results of the present research are in agreement with the Feminist Theory, which emphasizes the intersection of patriarchy and the state power to be discriminative against women and minorities (Tong, 2009). The testaments of Zia regime including the hudood ordinances and the law of evidence- reveals the institutionalization of gender discrimination by the state, which validates the argument made by Shabir and Mahmood (2020) that the state power served to legitimize the patriarchal power. The struggles of women in groups such as the Women Action Forum show the nature of activism as Imran and Munir (2018) write that women form their own movements against oppressive systems, despite the systemic obstacles. Meanwhile, the study builds up on the arguments made by Rouse (1986) and Yasmeen (1999) to demonstrate how patriarchy combined with religion and with the class to deny not only women but also any minority's equal citizenship. This proves the usefulness of Feminist Theory in the analysis of both oppression and resistance: why the struggles of women and minorities appeared under Zia, how they contested the power of the authoritarian regime and why their voices are still suppressed by the state narrative.

Unlike earlier researches, the main agenda of which was to study the women or minorities separately, the recent research includes both groups and demonstrates the process of their marginalization via patriarchy and Islamization as similar but different. The work contributes to the scholarship by anticipating the contradictions of the resistance movements- how the agency of women might be both disruptive and reinforcing of the patriarchal structures, how some minorities could negotiate between support and rejection in the religious patronage. It

shows that resistance in Pakistan during the Zia regime was not exactly secular or feminist but mired in the politics of faith, survival, and power politics and relegates both women and minority movements to the periphery of official history.

### Conclusion

This paper analyzed women and minority rights movements during the time of the General Zia-ul-Haq. It discovered that gender and religious discrimination was institutionalized in policies of Islamization in legislation like the Hudood Ordinances and the Law of Evidence. These legislations diminished the rights of women and strengthened the patriarchy. They also denied the minorities the equal citizenship by linking the national identity with religion. Irrespective of this oppression, movements of resistance came up. Other groups such as the Women Action Forum (WAF) confronted the discriminant laws and formed alternative platforms where the voices of women could be heard. Religious minorities also struggled to be recognized but their plight was not always visible in mainstream history. The results indicate that women and minorities were not mere victims who received passively, instead, they fought back through activism, legal actions and social organization. Their agency was complicated though. Feminist activism helped some women to rebel against patriarchal rule whereas others empowered themselves within religious and conservative structures. Equally, minorities at times joined religious groups to survive even where they held discriminative ideologies. This intricacy demonstrates that resistance in Pakistan cannot be perceived just on the liberal or secular grounds. The paper concludes that the rights movements of women and minorities continue to be peripheral to the official historical narratives of the Pakistani nation due to the predominance of state power, religion-oriented politics and patriarchy. Their plight emphasizes on the disputed issue of citizenship and equality in Pakistan. The identification of these voices has a role to play in creating a better historical record and enhancing the current work towards human rights, gender equality and minority protection.

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