

# Agents of change: Women's religious practice and development engagement in Pakistan

Kaja Borchgrevink, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

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## Abstract

This article examines the intersection of religion, gender and development through an analysis of religious practice and development engagement among women activists in two religio-political aid organizations in contemporary Pakistan. Situated on the margins of the mainstream aid and development field, these women are rarely conceded agents of development. Yet focusing on improving women's position and wellbeing, their activities are similar to those of many other development NGOs. As part of religio-political movements advancing gender complementarity and segregation, women's activism and conceptions of development reflect a particular intersection of religion, gender and class. A close read of women's discourse and practice reveals how women interpret and appropriate Islamic teachings, local cultural practices, and global norms by balancing ideology and pragmatism. In the process of negotiating, upholding and resisting norms and practices, these activists can be seen as active agents of change in their local contexts.

**Keywords:** gender; religion; Islam; development; Pakistan

## Introduction

Muslims in Pakistan, as elsewhere, have a long history of giving charity as part of their religious practice. Women play important roles in charity taking place in the domestic arena. They are also significant actors in formal welfare and development organizations, which unlike the political sphere, has been for some time an acceptable public arena for women's activism<sup>1</sup> (Jamal 2013). Yet little scholarly attention has been paid to women's participation in organized welfare and development-oriented work within religio-political, or Islamist<sup>2</sup>, movements. This article sets out to examine how religious discourses and practice, together with related gender ideologies, influence understandings of development among activists in two religio-political women's organizations in Pakistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Activism is here understood as women's purposeful actions to create change, combining religious practice and conduct with welfare and development objectives.

<sup>2</sup> 'Islamism' and 'Islamist' are widely used terms in the literature on political Islam to underline the political and ideological, rather than simply 'religious' character of movements such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamal 2013:7). In this study of women's religious practice and development work, I chose to use the more descriptive term 'religio-political', thus avoiding the connotations attached to the term 'Islamist' in contemporary politics and media debates.

The Al Khidmat Women Trust (AKWT) and the Minhaj Women League (MWL) – the two organizations studied in this article – are religio-political women’s organizations concerned with assisting women in need and improving their position in society. At first sight, they are not unlike other women-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) active in Pakistan and elsewhere. However, the AKWT and the MWL do not have an explicit goal of advancing women’s rights and gender equality in all spheres of life. Instead, the women participating in these organizations identify with religio-political movements advancing patriarchal<sup>3</sup> gender ideologies based on difference and complementarity, in which men and women are seen as being equal in worth but as having different and complementary roles, rights, and duties.

Defining themselves in opposition to principles of gender equality and women’s rights held in high esteem in mainstream gender and development discourse and practice, these female activists are rarely recognized as ‘agents of change’ or as actors in development, nor are they studied at such. Rather, the participation of women in conservative religion is often presented as a paradox: it raises questions regarding why women join religious organizations which subjugate them to patriarchal domination (Ben Shitrit 2013, Iqtidar 2011). Literature on Pakistan tends to focus on the role of Muslim women in politics, and some studies found that women in religio-political organizations are taking up new roles, departing from traditional roles in *dawa*<sup>4</sup> and charity work (Iqtidar 2011, Jamal 2013). Much less attention has been paid to the way in which *religion and gender shape conceptions and practices of development* among women engaged in development-related activities in religio-political movements (exceptions include Hafez 2011, Jamal 2013). In this article I therefore ask: how does religion influence women’s conceptions and practices of development, and how are these gendered? I proceed to answer these questions by examining women’s religious practices and development engagement in two religio-political women’s organizations in Pakistan, taking into account the perspectives and experiences of the women themselves.

The central argument presented here is that female activists engage with multiple and competing discourses on gender and development existing in contemporary Pakistan, which influences their conceptions of development and forms of engagement. This argument will be substantiated in this article through various subsections. I first situate women’s religio-political activism and development work in the broader landscape of women’s organizations in Pakistan. Second, I explore how gender ideologies influence women’s charity and development engagements, focusing on the ways in which the female activists understand and justify their own activism. In the following sections, in order to reveal the impact of gender ideologies, I focus on the practice of *purdah* and how it is negotiated in their activist work. I analyse how the activist women perceive of the problems they seek to mitigate, and the women they set

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<sup>3</sup> I use ‘patriarchal’ to denote an ideological system of social organization promoting male headship, where men hold power over women.

<sup>4</sup> The Arabic term ‘*dawa*’ means to ‘call’ or ‘invite’ to Islam and has become the common term used by Muslims to describe activities that aims to attract people to Islam.

out to assist. I then focus on the relationship between women's religious practices and development engagement, analysing how material and spiritual dimensions are integrated in their conceptualizations of development. Moreover, I discuss the female activists' class-based positionalities, arguing that particular intersection of gender, religion and class shape these women's activism and assumptions about the women they set out to assist. To conclude, I summarize how female activists relate to competing discourses on gender and development existing in Pakistan.

Before moving to the analysis, in the next section I situate this study in the context of wider debates about religion, development and gender, and outline the conceptual approach and the methodology employed.

### **Situating the study: development, Islam, and modernity**

In studying these religio-political activists as development actors, the focus is on their effort to help people in need and to contribute to societal development. While development can be understood in a broad sense as societal change, it is often used in a much narrower sense to describe the planned activities of international development actors (Horst and Sinatti 2015, Hart 2001). The origin of the idea of development as planned and guided intervention to improve the life of others, and as a means to aid broader processes of societal change, has been traced to 19th century Europe experiencing the consequences of industrialization and modernization (Cowen and Shenton 1996). The idea of aiding the 'distant other' emerged in response to social unrest as well as wars in Europe, but also as part of the colonial project (Barnett and Weiss 2008: 21). Through the provision of welfare services in health and education, colonial officers and missionaries were taking on the responsibilities, not only of improving people's material conditions, but also of civilizing and reforming the poor and uncivilized subjects (Stirrat 2008). The idea of guided intervention, which entails beliefs in reform and improvement, is found among colonial officers and missionaries, but also among contemporary development actors in terms of training people, and consciousness-raising (Stirrat 2008). As such development interventions can be seen to encompass a notion of improvement and reform not only of institutions but of individuals, and as involving not only material improvement, but also improvement through changing norms and values.

Islamic reformism can be seen as an alternative modernizing project when compared to that of the colonial rulers. The so-called 'global Islamic resurgence' emerging in the 20th century has been explained as a response to modernity, colonialization and globalization (Nasr 1996, Mandaville 2007). Calls for increased solidarity among the global community of Muslims (*ummah*) became central to Islamic anti-colonial liberation discourses (Juul Petersen, 2016). While rejecting colonialism and Western imperialism, Islamic resistance to colonial rule was not defined in opposition to modernity. As argued by Nasr (1996: 51), in the vision of Sayid Abul ala Maududi (one of the founders and the chief ideologue of Jamaat-e-Islami), 'the vanguard of the Islamic revolution' was not the traditional Islamic clergy, but was instead the modern middle-class Muslim man – and the modern Muslim middle-class

family. Viewing education as a means to transform women, women's education has been central to modernization discourses in diverse contexts (Chatterjee 1989, Robinson 2008). In both the colonial civilization project and the Islamic reform movement, women in middle-class households became central modernizing subjects. In the Islamic reform movement, the 'ideal Muslim women' was constructed through education teaching appropriate behaviors, emphasizing modesty and morality in daily life (Khurshid 2015: 102).

### **Studying Muslim women, gender, and development**

The role of religion in gender and development has attracted increased academic attention in recent years (Tomalin 2015). In general, however, religion – and Islam in particular – is often presented as an obstacle to development, and particularly to the inclusion of women and gendered approaches to development (Deneulin and Bano 2009). Both among scholars and practitioners, there has been little interest in notions of gender equality, women's rights, or ideal womanhood which do not correspond with liberal, secular feminist understandings of these concepts dominant in the gender and development field (Tomalin 2013, Bano 2009). Women participating in conservative religious movements are often disregarded as irrational, irrelevant, and backward (Bano 2009).

Gender equality has emerged as a widely accepted and unquestionable goal in global development and human rights discourses (Østebø & Haukanes 2016). Yet, the meaning of gender equality is not a given. Conceptualizations of gender equality, and particularly the notion of difference, have produced long-standing debates within feminist theory (Østebø & Haukanes 2016). In mainstream gender and development discourses, however, 'gender equality' is commonly understood as equality between women and men *in all spheres of life*, encompassing not only equal access and opportunities, but also transformation of patriarchal gender relations as a way to empower women (Tomalin 2013: 153). Opposed to this feminist understanding of gender equality are conceptions of gender equality informed by gender ideologies (denoting what are considered ideal gender roles and relations) based on complementarity, in which women and men are understood as being intrinsically different, and as having different roles, rights, and obligations. Gender ideologies promoting role complementarity are found across religious, cultural and geographical contexts (Avishai 2008, Ben Shitrit 2013, Burke 2012, Østebø 2015), and shape how women and men conceptualize gender equality, and what are considered appropriate gender roles and relations.

When exploring the intersection of religion, gender, and development in the context of religio-political women's activism, it is useful to draw on insights from the literature on Muslim women found in post-structuralist and postcolonial feminist scholarship (see Hafez 2011, Iqtidar 2013, Jamal 2013, Mahmood 2005), as well as from studies of gender and religion which, in different religious traditions and geographical contexts, have challenged images of religious women depicted as victims of their religious belief (see Avishai 2008, Ben Shitrit 2013, Mahmood 2005, Rinaldo 2014).

While representations of Muslim women as ‘the other’, as oppressed by patriarchal culture and religion and as victims in need of rescue have long dominated Western academic writing, studies essentializing Islam and presenting reductionist images of third world Muslim women have been thoroughly challenged (Abu-Lughod 2002, Bano 2009, Mohanty 2002).

Existing theories of women’s agency have been critiqued for presenting ‘a false dichotomy of women being either empowered or victimized, liberated or subordinated’ (Burke 2012: 123). Scholars studying Muslim women’s piety and activism have demonstrated how contextual analysis of women’s agency challenges perceptions of religious women as being oppressed, and opens for enquiry into the meaning these women give to their actions, without dismissing the role of faith as irrelevant (Mahmood 2005, Ben Shitrit 2013). What many of these studies of women in conservative, gender-traditional Islamic movements have in common, is that they contest notions of Islam as being anti-modern, and argue instead for an understanding of Islam as part of the modern, as an expression of ‘multiple modernities’ (Khurshid 2015). Identifying diverging interpretations of women’s roles, rights and responsibilities, they emphasize the need to understand women’s situated subjectivities, where women’s own experiences shape and are shaped by particular historical and geographical contexts, as well as the intersections of religion, gender and broader class-based identities (Yuval-Davis 2006, Khurshid 2015). This paper seeks to contribute to an analysis of the intersection of gender, religion and development in a specific context, as positioned, relational, and situated knowledge(s) (Haraway 1988), by providing a case study of women’s religious practice and development engagement within two religio-political movements in contemporary Pakistan.

## **Methods and data**

This article emerged from a larger study examining Islamic charity and development engagements among actors associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Minhaj-ul-Quran International (MQI), two religio-political organizations originating in Pakistan, with strong transnational networks to Europe and elsewhere (Borchgrevink and Erdal, 2017). As two religio-political movements practising gender segregation, my attention was turned to the women’s organizations and their involvement in development work. In this article I primarily draw on semi-structured interviews in Urdu and English with 30 women<sup>5</sup> working or volunteering in women’s organizations associated with religio-political movements in Pakistan. Reflecting the member base of the two movements, the women and men I interviewed belonged to the urban, educated middle class and elite. They were otherwise a heterogeneous group: they ranged in age from early twenties to older than sixty years; they were ethnically and geographically diverse; and they held diverse socio-economic positions, reflected partially through level and type of education, occupation (working/housewife) and marital status. Not all informants were

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<sup>5</sup> The larger study involved qualitative, multi-sited fieldwork in Pakistan, Norway and the UK in the period 2012 to 2015, including a total of 92 semi-structured interviews with both men and women. Research participants were recruited through snow-ball sampling.

official members of the political parties, but all were engaged in welfare work and social activism associated with one of the two movements. The interviews focused on what, how, and why women engaged in charity and development-related activities. The data was analysed using thematic codes, developed partly from the research questions and partly as they emerged from the empirical material. The interviews in this study are complemented by informal interviews and participatory observations from project sites and events, as well as printed and online material published by the organizations.

### **Situating women's activism in Pakistan**

Pakistan has experienced profound political, social, and cultural change in the past decades. Neo-liberal political and economic reforms have opened up for privatization of welfare and social services, increasing the space for NGOs. Massive rural–urban migration, increased access to education for men and women, and entry of middle-class groups into local and national politics have opened up space for women's participation in public life (Jamal 2013). The government of Pakistan has introduced a number of policies and reforms aimed at enhancing women's participation in politics, community development, and the economy (Weiss 2014). At the same time, Pakistan has undergone a process of Islamization<sup>6</sup> of law and society (Jamal 2013: 204–205) and many of the government's policies on gender equality have met resistance from the religious establishment (Kirmani 2013, Weiss 2014). Pakistan is experiencing a so-called 'religious resurgence', where Islamic reformist movements are becoming more visible, not only as political parties but in everyday life (Iqtidar 2011). Religion and religiously informed gender norms are at the crux of these transformations.

The AKWT and the MWT are situated in a broad landscape of women's organizations in Pakistan, sharing a focus on women in particular, providing assistance to, and working to transform women's position in society. While there is great diversity among these organizations in terms of scope, scale, and focus of activities, two broad groups can be identified: women-focused NGOs and women organizations associated with religio-political movements. The women-focused NGOs are in different ways inspired by liberal feminist ideas, and by the global discourses on gender equality and women's rights. Feminist ideas and activism have a long history in Pakistan, as is the case in many Muslim majority countries. In the 1970s, several feminist women's NGOs were established, including the Aurat Foundation, Women Action Network, and Shirkat Gah, which have been influential in shaping the discourse on gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment in Pakistan (Bano 2009, Kirmani 2013). Without being explicitly secular or anti-religious, many liberal feminists in Pakistan, as elsewhere, uphold that women's rights are best defined outside of a religious framework (Bano 2009, Kirmani 2013).

In parallel to the women's rights movement, religio-political women's activism developed with the growth of 'Islamism' in Pakistan and the Islamization policies of

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<sup>6</sup> Islamization is a term commonly used by scholars to denote a particular set of political and legal changes instigated by General Zia ul Haq in Pakistan with the aim of aligning society with a particular interpretation of Sharia (Jamal 2013)

General Zia ul Haq (from 1979). Women's organizations associated with the JI and the MQI are among the best-established organizations in Pakistan. Many members of these religio-political women's organizations endorse gender ideologies that are actively promoting rather than challenging a division of labor in the family and society where the male sphere is the public and the female sphere is the domestic. While sharing a concern for the position of women with the women's-rights-oriented NGOs, the women in these religio-political women's organizations do not consider themselves to be feminist, but define themselves in opposition to what they consider to be Westernized ideas about women's liberation.

Both groups of women's organizations, like many other NGOs in Pakistan, are run by the urban, educated, middle class and other elites, pointing to the significance not only of gendered and religious subjectivities, but also to the importance of class, education, and geography in these women's subject positions.

#### *The Al Khidmat Women Trust (AKWT) and the Minhaj Women League (MWL)*

The AKWT presents itself as an organization that works for social reformation. Its main areas of focus are welfare, relief, and development. Spreading the teaching of Islam (*dawa*) and the religious training and moral self-fashioning of the individual (*tarbiyat*) are also seen as integral functions of the organization. The AKWT's main activities include the provision of health services, education, water supply, vocational training, financial aid, dowry boxes, collective marriages as well as religious classes.

The AKWT is the sister organization of the all-male Al Khidmat Foundation (ALKF), and is part of a network of organizations associated with the JI. The work of the AKWT is part of the welfare tradition of the JI, for which the provision of welfare services both to its own party members and to others in need have been a central part of party ideology since the 1950s (Bano 2012). Starting as a small-scale initiative in a local neighborhood in Karachi in the 1960s, the AKWT was formally registered in 1980 and has since grown to a countrywide network tied to the JI political party structure across the country. While the core individuals running the AKWT are associated with the JI, volunteers are recruited through social networks within and outside the party.

The MWL is the women's wing of the MQI, which is a member-based religious organization founded in Pakistan in 1981 by the religious scholar and lawyer Dr Tahir-ul-Qadri, a charismatic preacher-turned-politician. The MQI is structured on the model of the JI, with hierarchical tiers of organizations in Pakistan and the diaspora. Unlike the AKWT, the MWL does not have a specific focus on welfare, but sees charity, welfare and development work as an integral part of their mission, whose specific focus areas are spreading the teaching of Islam (*dawa*), the religious training and moral self-fashioning of the individual (*tarbiyat*) and the building and strengthening of the organization (*tanzeemat*). The MWL collaborates with the Minhaj Welfare Foundation – the MQI organization whose specific mandate is welfare, relief and development – in some of its welfare and relief activities, particularly in the preparation and distribution of food, clothes and other items to women and children. The activists of the MWL are organized into local chapters across the country and much of their work takes place in

the communities in which they live. Similar to the JI, the MQI appeals to the Pakistani middle class (Philippon 2012). Most of the activists I interviewed were educated, and several held degrees in Islamic Studies from the Minhaj University in Lahore.

Both the AKWT and the MWL are women's organizations associated with religio-political movements in Pakistan that advance particular interpretations of Islam in which religion and politics are seen as inseparable, and for which the establishment of an Islamic state is the ultimate goal. The two movements represent two different schools of Islam: 'Jamaat-e-Islami', which means 'party of Islam', is the progenitor of all Islamist parties in Pakistan (Nasr, 1996); 'Minhaj-ul-Quran International', which means 'the method of the Quran', has its origins in the Barelvi Sufi (mystic) tradition, though is a reformist movement, also described as neo-Sufi (Philippon, 2012). Both movements are reformist in that they break with earlier interpretations of Islam, advancing an integration of Islam and modernity, while rejecting what they consider to be 'Western secularity'.

While the two movements have had mixed and shifting relationships with the state throughout their histories, both movements and their associated political parties can today be considered part of the mainstream political opposition in Pakistan. While the two religio-political movements are similar in many ways, they exhibit very different stances towards international development discourse and practice. The JI takes a strong anti-Western stance, criticizing the international development industry for being culturally imperialist, paternalistic, and Eurocentric (Jamal 2013: 190). The MQI takes a more accommodating approach in searching for common ground. Adopting the language of human rights and democracy, MQI is presenting itself as an enlightened Muslim alternative to extremism and terrorism (Philippon 2012).

Both present themselves as alternatives: to more traditional culture, seen as backward and anti-modern (such as cultural practices described by the research participants as 'un-Islamic remains of Hindu culture'); to other competing religio-political projects that they consider 'extremist' or 'terrorist'; and to 'feminism' as advocated by liberal feminist women's organizations locally and globally. The two organizations can be viewed as being in competition with one another and with other religio-political groups for the higher moral ground, and for political, social and cultural influence.

### **Gender ideology and practice**

In this section I introduce the gender-ideologies of the two movements. I explore how gender ideologies promoting complementarity and segregation – expressed through the institution of purdah - influence women's activism, focusing on the ways in which the female activists understand and justify their own activism.

The JI and the MQI are both male-headed movements promoting gender ideologies in which ideal gender roles and relations, rights and responsibilities are defined by biological differences, reflecting what they understand as God-given, ontological differences between men and women. In a similar manner to other movement adhering to gender-traditional ideologies (Burke 2012), the JI and the MQI



promote the belief that men and women were created to fulfil complementary (but equally worthy) roles, with different rights and responsibilities. Women's primary responsibility is towards the family as a mother and wife, taking care of the home, her children, and her husband. Men's primary responsibility is as protector and provider for the family. These gender ideologies based on complementarity are also reflected in the physical separation of men and women. Being part of gender-traditional religious organizations, the women working in the ALWT and the MWL can be assumed to be socialized into gender roles of domesticity.

Both the AKWT and the MWL are gender-segregated, women-only environments, practicing *purdah*. *Purdah*, meaning curtain, is the common word describing the institution of secluding women from men to enforce high standards of female modesty (Papanek 1971, Jamal 2013). The institution of *purdah* defines appropriate interaction between men and women, but what 'appropriate' means is subject to multiple individual and collective interpretations, reflected not only in a diversity of practices between groups, but also within groups and families (Weiss 2014). Gender segregation is not unique to these religio-political organizations; in fact it is quite common in the workplace in Pakistan. In the mainstream development sector, for example, female social organizers work with women, while the males work with men (Grünenfelder 2013).

The institution of *purdah* is a central element in Islamist ideologies in South Asia. In one of his key texts from 1939, 'Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam', Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi – JI's key ideologue – emphasized the separation of men and women as the foundation of the social structure in the ideal Islamic state. Similarly, in the writings of the MQI's spiritual and political leader, Dr Tahir-ul-Qadri, the institution of *purdah* is seen as ensuring a moral society: preventing promiscuity and supporting the centrality of marriage and the family as the foundation of the ideal Islamic state (Qadri 2011).

The women I interviewed all observed *purdah*, but in different ways. For example, while all the women veiled themselves, there was great variation in terms of using a loose *dupatta*, a fitted *hijab* or a full covering *niqab*. The women practise *purdah* by wearing a covering, and by gender-segregated organizing of activities, but unlike more traditionalistic interpretations of *purdah* which confine women to the home, these women participate in the public sphere. In both organizations, women can work (in paid work and as volunteers) as long as *purdah* is observed and as long as it does not compromise what they consider to be their primary domestic responsibilities, which are towards the family and the home.

The MWL has structured its organization so that women can join as volunteers for Minhaj without neglecting their responsibilities at home. As explained to me by Shazia,<sup>7</sup> a Minhaj activist, in her twenties:

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<sup>7</sup> All names are pseudonyms to protect the research participants' identities.

As you know, in our society females have to do household work, and there are family matters too, and besides that some have to work outside the home. So we have divided work in small units so that if a person spares one hour, it becomes workable for her.

In this way, the women in the MWL do not directly challenge what they consider to be women's role as the keeper of the house, but have found ways to balance their domestic responsibilities with their activism in the public sphere. Other women's reflections involved more complex considerations than simply making their activism secondary to their domestic responsibilities. For instance Salima, a Minhaj activist in her thirties, said:

Where a female thinks that she can perform work outside the home after fulfilling the household responsibilities – just like you are doing, as I am sitting here ... if I feel that I am managing my household tasks and I can work outside the home, then a female should work. Then this concept should not exist that I will keep myself bound in the house and pay my services to the house only. So if you have a talent to do work outside the home, so you should do so.

Sitting in her own office in Lahore, Salima was asserting her right to use her talent outside the home, revealing a sense of conscious choice associated with autonomous free will that stands in contrast to notions of duty and responsibility towards the family often assumed of women socialized to domesticity (Ben Shitrit, 2013).

The women working at the MQI headquarters in Lahore have all moved up the organizational hierarchy. For some, working at the headquarters involves leaving their home towns and families and moving to Lahore. This is uncommon and viewed as inappropriate by many in Pakistan (Grünenfelder, 2013) - thus challenge common perceptions about women's roles and the spaces available to them. As such, these women's commitments to activism sometimes pose challenges for them, both practical and moral. As Amina, a Minhaj activist in her thirties explained it: 'Sometime you have to sacrifice something to reach your objectives'. She has sacrificed – at least for a period – traditional family life, so central to the female ideal in the MQI. The women at the MQI headquarters demonstrate by their own examples that it is possible for women to prioritize their own interests, both in terms of practical arrangements (such as women's hostels) and moral acceptability, and that women's activism is accepted and facilitated by the organization.

### **Purdah and activism**

Both AKWT and MWL activists engage in welfare and development-oriented work, and relief activities. In this section I analyse how gender ideologies, and the institution of *purdah* discussed above, shape the space available to the female activist. I find that the women, through their relief activities, negotiate the meaning of *purdah*, and that they by doing this expand the role of women in the broader religious movements.

In their on-going welfare activities, the women do what they believe 'men cannot do': they focus on women, assessing women's needs and providing assistance to women in a gender-segregated fashion, for instance as female doctors, in women's centres with

vocational training course for women, and in providing separated education for girls and boys. This reflects ideas about what is considered appropriate gender roles and relations in the broader religio-political movements.

Working in gender-segregated organizations, men and women collaborate in executing relief work. For instance, while the AKWT is a separate organization to the main, all-male Al Khidmat Foundation, the two organizations coordinate their relief activities: male activists are involved in actual rescue and relief activities in the field, female activists are packing food and non-food items and mobilizing resources. According to Sana, an Al Khidmat activist in her forties, the male organization takes care of the tasks that, in her opinion, ‘woman cannot do’, like constructing tents or distributing relief help in floodwaters. Sana explains how men and women have different, complementary responsibilities in the relief operation:

In times of catastrophes, we work in the form of three R's. The first R is Rescue; it is purely done by our male members, by our Foundation members [the Al Khidmat Foundation]. The second R is Relief. When the second R comes; they [the Al Khidmat Foundation] call on us for to make family packs ... which we call relief packages. These include tents, there is mattress, all the necessities, I mean [food] rations and all the food items, so basically for one family we arrange a whole small home for them, which is distributed by our male members ... The most active phase for the Women's Trust is Relief. And then the third R comes, Rehabilitation ... they [men] distribute different things, seeds, cattle and all the other things for their livelihood, or they want to make their houses and all that, so we give money.

Although not a regular activity, ALWF and MWL activists sometimes travel to earthquake - and flood-affected areas to assess the situation and take part in the distribution of relief items to women. Travelling in the company of other women, appropriately veiled, these women relief workers have accomplished something that is out of reach for most women in Pakistan. They narrated their experiences with enthusiasm and pride, revealing a sense of empowerment. Here the women can be seen as negotiating the meaning of *purdah*. Practicing *purdah* through veiling and gender segregation the women can be seen as taking up new roles in development and relief work, expanding the space available to women within the religio-political movements. This interpretation of *purdah* still provides the moral safeguard that makes women's participation in the public sphere morally acceptable. As such, these religio-political women's organizations offer a space for women's activism that for many of the women would be unthinkable outside a religious setting.

### **Ideology and pragmatism**

The activist women describe contemporary Pakistan as a difficult and dangerous place for women to live. In this section I analyse how the activist women perceive of the problems they seek to mitigate, and the women they set out to help. I reveal how material and spiritual dimensions are included in their perceptions of poverty, and that, despite breaking with established gender ideologies of complementarity and segregation

discussed above, they balance ideological and pragmatic concerns in their actual activist work.

Like many women's NGOs, both the AKWT and the MWL focus on helping women and children in need. Not unlike the construction of 'poor women' in other development discourses (Zaman, 2008), the activists perceive 'poor women' to be particularly helpless, vulnerable and in need of protection. These representations can in part be understood as a reflection of essentialized gender roles, where women are seen as vulnerable by nature, but they can also be understood as political evaluations of the situation for women in present-day Pakistan. Far from an ideal society in their view, the situation in Pakistan is described as posing concrete threats to individual women's security and to their livelihoods. In this respect, the religio-political women's organizations share several concerns (and assumptions) with many feminist women's NGOs.

The women these organizations aim to help are perceived as poor in both spiritual and material terms. Poverty is understood not only as lack of material needs, but also as spiritual deprivation and moral decline. The consequences of poverty are conceived of as a threat to the wellbeing of the individual, as well as to the desired social order. In contrast to mainstream development approaches where women's employment is seen as desirable if not indispensable to economic development (also in Government of Pakistan policy), women employment is not seen as desirable by all women in these movements. In both JI and MQI Islam is interpreted to give women the right to be taken care of financially by her male relatives. Hence some women perceive women's employment as a negative consequence of poverty. For instance, in the words of Bushra, an Al Khidmat activist in her forties:

Basically I think the problems faced by the women of ours are purely because of, I mean, the male ... are not getting jobs ... if the males get the jobs, the women can stay at home. She can educate her girl, her boy, both of them and, they can live like a family. But nowadays because there are less jobs for men, and they are not employed properly, so the women have to work too.

In Bushra's view, the lack of employment opportunities for men is forcing women into employment in order to provide for themselves and their families. This break with their understanding of women's right to be taken care of financially by men, and is seen as coming in the way of women's domestic obligations. Recognising that this 'right' is not enjoyed by most poor women in Pakistan today, however, the AKWT supports women through skills development and vocational training. Women are offered training in sewing and embroidery – skills that will enable women to earn a living from within their homes. As such, the female activists can be seen as breaking with strict ideals about women's domestic roles. By providing women with the means to 'earn with dignity',<sup>8</sup> the activists can be seen as balancing ideological and pragmatic concerns, negotiating which norms to uphold and which ones to challenge.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.alkhidmatkhawateen.org/english/welfare\\_planing.php](http://www.alkhidmatkhawateen.org/english/welfare_planing.php)

## **Dawa and development**

Above I have argued that the female activists are balancing ideological and pragmatic concerns in their efforts to help women in need. In the following section I will examine how development is conceptualized by the women in the two organizations, and how material and spiritual dimensions play into this.

For the activist in AKLF and MWL, conditions in Pakistan are seen as posing a threat to women's well-being. Contemporary society is viewed as in decline – both economically and morally. This decline is explained partly as the result of mismanagement and inability of the state to provide for its citizens, and partly as the result of a lack of religion. The high levels of poverty, corruption, and violence marking contemporary Pakistan are also perceived as a consequence of people losing their faith and not living in accordance with the Quranic teachings.

While the religio-political women's organizations share a number of concerns with many mainstream feminist women's NGOs, the ways in which these social problems are constructed differ – as do the proposed remedies for solving these issues. Unlike mainstream approaches to development that commonly employ materialist and often secular understandings of development (Tomalin, 2015), the conceptions and approaches to development advanced by these women's organizations incorporate both material and spiritual dimensions. The activists uphold the view that in order to change society, people need to turn to religion. Social change is conceived to be contingent upon change at the personal level, making religious training and moral self-fashioning of the individual central to these women's conceptions of social change and societal development. In the MWL, apart from the tasks of preparing and distributing food and other relief items, welfare work is seen as integral part of the work of the departments focusing on *dawa* and *tarbiyat*. In both the MQI and the JI, emphasis is put on the importance of seeking knowledge. The female activists are well-schooled in the movements' respective interpretations of Islam. Religious knowledge is not only important for the purpose of spiritual attainment; it is also closely tied to social action (Nasr, 1996; Jamal, 2013). The significance placed on religious teachings can be seen when the women reflect upon their own activism. Sana, an Al Khidmat activist in her forties, explained:

We have this *Hadith* in our religion. Our Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said that 'if you know one good thing then you should transfer it to others.' So in our religion, we are constantly a *daii* [one who teaches *dawa*]. I mean, if I am saying anything to you, I am a *daii*. I should tell you some good things too. Being a Muslim is being incomplete without *dawa* ... In our religion, in our culture, a lady is also a *daii*. A lady, a woman, a housewife is also a *daii*. She is giving *dawa* to her kids. She is teaching good ... we are *daiis* to our maids, meaning we are giving *dawa* to our maids too. In our religion, we are responsible for all persons who are under us for their moralities.

When I came here and we made this centre, when we started teaching them stitching, teaching them computer, we decided that we should be taking care of their moralities too.

And this was being taught to us in that class [of the JI] ... you should take care of their need, their spiritual and their physical need. And their spiritual need is to be a good member of the society, to be a good Muslim ... this is *dawa*, the teaching moralities to others, because it's part of our religion to teach others good and forbid them from evil.

All the women I interviewed pointed to individual religious motivations, viewing their welfare work as an integral part of their religious practice. Religion or *din* – the Islamic way of life – was emphasized as a key motivational factor for engaging in voluntary work. The religious motivations are complex: they include what the women describe as a religiously prescribed duty to help individuals in need and to contribute to building a better society, but they also involve very personal notions of fear and rewards, both in the present and in the afterlife. Leila, a senior woman activist with the ALWT, explained while we were sitting in her grand but modestly decorated house in one of Lahore's better neighbourhoods: 'We do this to please God ... it is not only about the development of society here today, but also about rewards in the hereafter'.

Religious teachings and ways of conduct imparted through the JI and the MQI serve as motivation and shape women's activism and development engagements in both organizations. In order to improve the current situation in Pakistan, the female activists emphasized the need to make changes at the individual and the societal level. In their view, a good society is a moral society made up of righteous, pious individuals. Thus, leading people to 'the right path' through their own example, such as in helping the poor, is central to these women's ideas of development and the ways to achieve it. Because most people in Pakistan are already Muslims, converting people to Islam is not the main purpose of *dawa*. Rather, it is about guiding people in how to be 'good Muslims'. Spreading what they believe to be 'the right way of Islam' becomes, for them, a necessary and integrated part of what can be described as their approach to development.

### **Class-based subjectivities and assumptions**

In this section I turn to the question of how intersections of gender, religion and class shape the female activists' subject-positions, and how this impact on their conceptions and practices of development.

What most of the women that I interviewed had in common was that they did this work in a voluntary capacity and mobilized local resources. While the mainstream, rights-based women's NGOs usually rely on institutional, and often foreign, funding (Bano, 2009), the women of the AKWT and the MWL are conscious of not taking money from institutional donors, and rely instead on resources raised through individuals in their own networks.

The women generally seem to be very conscious of their personal socio-economic situations, viewing themselves as in a position to 'give something back' and as having a religious duty to help those in need. Some of the women who volunteer their time on a daily basis are in a position where they do not have to work, and their financial needs are taken care of by their male relatives. Other women find time in their schedules to

volunteer after work. All the activists are assisting women they consider to be less well-off than themselves. Both the JI and the MQI mobilize resources and volunteers among urban middle-class and elite women, as explained by Rabia, an Al Khidmat activist in her sixties:

The way we work, actually we approach the well-off families, well-off women and we educate them about what's the purpose of our living, that one day naturally we have to ... we will have to leave this world and we have to go in front of God, and exhibit our responsibilities as a Muslim, what we have done. We are, praise God (*alhamdulillah*), from rich families, and so are the other families too ... we take them to these suburbs and most of these women haven't ever visited these [low-income] areas ... when they see all the poverty over there, then they voluntarily give their time, and with their time the money also comes.

These women's activism reflects not only gendered or religious subjectivities, but also class-based subjectivities of women belonging to the middle-class and elite social strata in contemporary Pakistan. Although the female activists can be seen as utilizing their own gender identity to connect with the women they set out to assist, one might question whether these gender-based identities lead to an understanding and ability among such women to meet the needs of women in the low-income areas in which they work. How does their urban, educated, middle-class and elite position affect their assessment of challenges to women's wellbeing? It is important to question how relevant these ideological and religious agendas are when considering women in need, and how such assistance is perceived by the recipients of that assistance. This lies outside the scope of this study, but clearly it would be an interesting area for further research.

The way in which the female activists talk about the poor women they aim to assist reveals a notion of being responsible for the moral improvement of others. It explicates a hierarchical structure of proselytizing to subordinates and protecting them from 'their own harmful ways', which is not unlike reform projects of colonial missionaries, or of contemporary 'development missionaries' (Stirrat 2008: 21). In all of these projects, development can be seen as a moral, spiritual, or 'civilizational' agenda, where middle-class actors aim not simply at improve the economic condition of the poor, but to improve the poor themselves, to make them into better (more moral, more worthy, more conscious and civilized) subjects. These notions of development can be seen as reflecting typical neo-liberal discourses, which focuses on the individual, and not on structural inequalities in society that are manifested in class differences between the activists and their beneficiaries.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion: Competing discourses on gender and development**

While some Pakistani feminists interpret Islamic teachings in ways that allow feminist notions of gender equality and women's rights to be compatible with an Islamic framework (Weiss 2014), the women I interviewed in AKWT fervently reject what they call 'Western feminism'. The AKWT women in particular seem to be very well aware

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion the compatibility of religious and neo-liberal values, or 'pious neo-liberalism' see Atia, 2012.

of dominant discourses on gender and development and are providing counter-discourses with alternative interpretations of women's empowerment and understandings of women's rights.

These women do not attempt to redefine or challenge the principal patriarchal structure in society. At a discursive level, they do not view patriarchy as a system to be changed; they adhere to gender ideologies emphasizing the complementarity of 'God-given' gender roles in which biological sex reflects ontological differences between men and women. In practice, however, gender ideologies are negotiated. The activists negotiate pragmatic concerns and religious teachings as they explain and justify their own activism and employment, and through the activities that they do such as offering women income-earning opportunities (even if women's employment is seen as undesirable).

The female activists draw on discursive elements from both Islam and from international discourses on gender equality when they construct themselves as activists and their activism. Notions relating to gender equality, women's rights, and women's empowerment are frequently invoked when the women speak about their work, yet these concepts are constructed with reference to the Islamic traditions in which these women are situated, resulting in very different meanings from those commonly understood in mainstream development discourse and practice. Although the ways these women understand gender equality and women's rights can be seen as conflicting with those understandings advocated by the feminist women's rights organizations, these female activists are, in comparison to many other women in Pakistan, breaking away from the more traditionalist positions on women's roles, such as those in which women are confined to the domestic sphere. Through participation in these organisations these religious women are taking on new roles: they organize and participate in welfare, development and relief-related activities in an organized manner, in more and more professional ways.

This study reveals that although religion and the ideology of the respective movements influence women's everyday life and activism, religion is not the only factor shaping women's subjectivities. Overall the women in this study also reflect particular class-based subjectivities related to the advantaged position of women belonging to the urban, educated middle class and elite in Pakistan. As such the religious activist women can be seen as utilizing the space opened up to women's participation in public life, through women's access to education, reserved seats in politics, and through new spaces for women's activism in politics and the social sector.

This article focuses on women's activism specifically, because women in religio-political movements rarely are studied as actors in development. In this study I have found that women are important in these roles. Women's principal position in the family – being responsible for raising children, taking care of family health and nutrition, and supporting children in education – makes women central to bringing about change in the family, and by extension in society. Women are considered crucial for creating change (both material and spiritual, and at the individual and social level) also by the



all-male organizations, which recognize the importance of women activist in reaching women and in mobilizing both volunteers and resources.

This article has explored how religious discourses and practice, together with related gender ideologies, influence understandings of development among activists in religio-political women's organizations in Pakistan. Gender ideologies based on complementarity and segregation shapes these women's activism. Yet, as this analysis has shown, these gender ideologies are not fixed; they are interpreted and negotiated by individual women in their everyday life and collectively by women-organized activism. The female activists in the two organizations share a vision of development in which material and spiritual dimensions are integrated. This is reflected in their rationales and strategies of engagement: they work for change at the individual and the societal level simultaneously through a combination of moral and material improvements.

The negotiation these women perform on an everyday basis, reveals how neither Islam nor gender ideologies are fixed entities, but are constantly being interpreted and appropriated by women situated in particular contexts. As seen in women's religious practice and activism elsewhere (Avishai 2008, Ben Shitrit 2013), Islamic teachings, local cultural practices, and global norms form part of the discourses these women navigate, interpret, and appropriate to their local contexts. This makes these women active agents of change, by negotiating which norms and practices to modify and which ones to preserve.

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