

Socio-Psychological Impacts Of Religious Extremism On Women Of Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract: Throughout human history, people have perpetrated extreme violent acts in the name of religion –A complex series of psychological, political, historical and theological factors combine to trigger such behavior. The September 11/2001 and the post - facto situation has given air to religious extremism in certain areas of the globe and Pakistan is not an exception to this. This event has severe effects on society of Pakistan. Many studies have been conducted on the different aspects of extremisms, but very less work is done on the impact of religious extremism on women. This paper emphasizes on the impacts of religious extremism on women in Sindh province, where recent incidents have given a blow to many social, ethnic and human mishaps regarding women. The study is based on secondary data collected from various reports and data collected through semi structured questionnaire from the randomly selected population. The Study identifies restricted mobility, uncertainty, fear and stress due to incidences prompted by religious extremism have high impact on the psychology of women. The findings of this study suggest immediate measures by all the major stakeholders to tackle the issue for enabling women to enjoy their basic human rights and participate equally for their economic prosperity.

Keywords: Economic dependence, Fear, Restricted mobility, Uncertainty, Well-being rights.

I. Introduction

“You have to quit confusing a madness with a mission” Flannery O'Connor

It will not be wrong to say that religious extremism has proved as the most significant threat to women in Pakistan. Religious Extremism can be defined as an outright opposition to rational thinking or rigid interpretation of religion that are forced upon others using social or economic coercion, laws, intolerance or violence; targeting of women with a downgraded secondary position and denial of their rights is the main feature of the extremist movements (ICAN, 2014a; Javaid, 2011). Participation of women in decision making at various levels is strongly challenged by the extremists because they believe it is a religious obligation of women to remain in the home, any change in the traditional perceived role of women is considered as onslaught of western culture and a serious threat to the institution of family and Islam (Khan, N.A). A notion that man is inherently superior to women and the women’s sexual behavior is linked to male honor is powerful perpetrators of violence against women (Niaz, 2004). Women have an increased vulnerability to the psychological consequences of war (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). The purpose of this study is to understand the significance of religious extremism on the socio-psychological life of women in Sindh province of Pakistan by using a human rights lens.

According to (Taylor, Repetti, & Seeman, 1997) people have evolved as social animal and social environment have the potential to affect, therefore opportunities for positive social integration are component of safe and healthy social environment; psychological factors hostility and depression are nested within geographic, developmental, occupational and social environment the stressful family environment may produce chronic anxiety or depression . The structure and quality of social interactions have a profound effect on our health and well-being. Social wellbeing is about the experiences connected with interaction with others and comprised of two major component supportive relationships and trust and belonging or we can say that social wellbeing relates to one's ability to participate in society, fulfilling roles as family member, friend, worker, or citizen or in other ways engaging in interactions with others. Social wellbeing antidotes to racism, stigma, violence and crime (Callaghan, 2008; FPH, 2010; NIH, 2014). Women’s well-being is highly related to their position in society and the level of discrimination while psychological well-being is a combination of feeling good and working effectively, which is highly influenced by the social environment (Huppert, 2009); events in the world beyond an individual’s immediate experience do sometimes have an important impact on his emotions, such events are capable of producing excitement, anxiety, pleasure and many other emotions in people who have no personal knowledge of the events or of the persons involved (Bradburn, 1969). A report by (Munton et al., 2011) indicates that being well educated, aware about other ethnic or religious groups and increase financially stable resilience to participating in Al Qaeda-influenced violent extremism.

II. Pakistan

Pakistan, a country of 187 million people, belonging to diverse ethnic groups, speakers of many languages and branches of religious faith, Pakistan came into being in 1947 with a vision of founder Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah 'to wholly and solely concentrate on the well-being of the people' differentiating religion from the business of state (ICAN, 2014b) .

In the post 9/11 scenario, due to change in policy at the highest level the domestic and external dynamics of the state changed; the crackdown against religious groups led to frustration and anger (Hashmi, 2009). Islamabad's obvious strategic importance in the US-led war on terror and the extent of religious radicalization in the country have made Pakistan a special focus of discourses on religious extremism and fundamentalism (Pakistan Today, 2014). It will not be wrong to say that in the present circumstance, the most potent threat that Pakistan faces for its internal security emanates from religious extremism (Javaid, 2011). The most severe forms of discrimination researched for the members of the Hindu, Christian and Ahmedi community; members of the Shia sect of Islam suffer the highest toll in violence (HRCP, 2012).

Sindh

Religious extremism is the common visible factor of trends and pattern of radicalization in Pakistan while provincial differences are an important feature in this context (Rathore & Basit, 2010) In a country ruled by violent strife, the southern province Sindh, celebrated as the "land of Sufis" has long prized its reputation as a Pakistani bastion of tolerance and diversity (Imtiaz & Walsh, 2014). Rising wave of extremism has engulfed Sindh; incident of violence on the part of the extremism, unheard of in the past has become too common in Sindh (Pakistan Today, 2014). As the majority of Sindhi people are advocates of Sufism, and have always condemned the Taliban's un-Islamic acts so the Taliban militants consider Sufism as a big threat to their radical brand of Islam (Rehman, 2011) . The target attacks in Karachi, increasing level of violence and harassment against religious minority communities not getting any attention (HRCP, 2012).

Situation of Women

It's important to note that 60 percent of the world's population belongs to Asia with all the major religion, the continent is extremely diverse with social; economic political and traditional constellations. Religious extremism is regarded as a significant factor shaping the women agency in Asia, fundamentalism affects women inappropriately and frequently that prevents them from standing up for their rights and autonomy (Derichs & Fleshenberg, 2010), identically being a woman in Pakistan is not a privilege, the situation is bad if poor and worse if she belongs to a religious minority group (Khaliq, 2012). In Pakistani society, religious teachings are often manipulated and misinterpreted so as to have an edge over women in terms of rights and status (Soomro, Shah, Jamali, & Shah, 2012). War on terrorism not only helped grow further extremism, but also created a non conducive environment for women, anybody talk about women's rights is branded as anti-Islamic and pro-west (Khaliq, 2010).

The status of women in Sindh is difficult to understand they are considered honor of the family and respected, but mistrusted too (Soomro et al., 2012). During the last three years, several complaints have emerged from the Hindu community regarding the abduction of their girls and their forced conversion which in turn has led to migrations of several Hindu families (Pakistan Today, 2014). Despite the long history of inclusion in the social, political, economic and even religious fabric of upper Sindh had prevented a rush for the exit by Hindus, that seems to be changing (HRCP, 2012). According Imtiaz and Walsh (2014) police officials, politicians, and activists states the growth in fundamentalist groups is alarmingly rapid in Sindh and has brought violence in its wake.

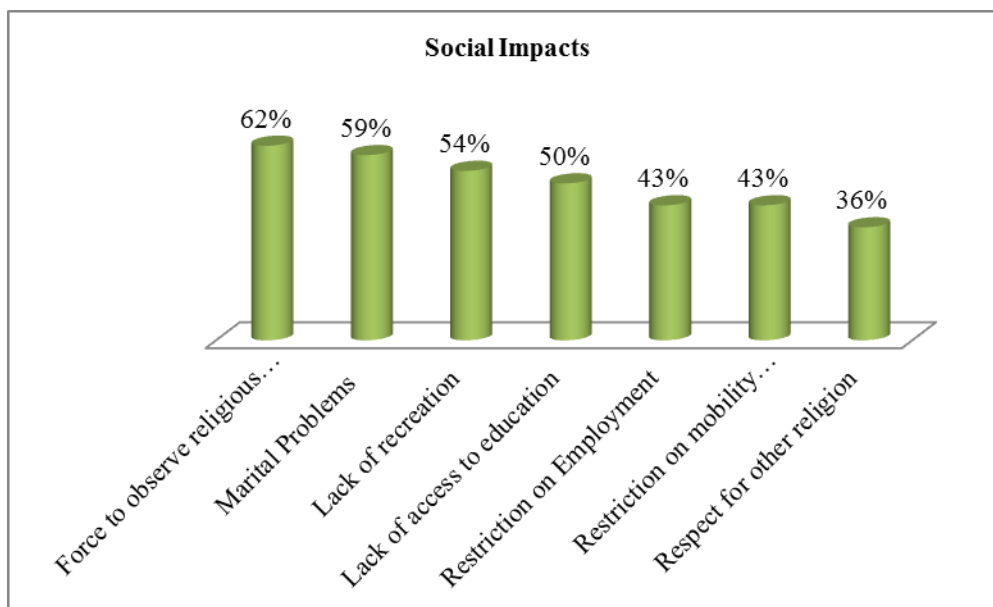
III. Methodology

The study employs a mixed methodology of data collection. A survey with rating scale and open ended question was created on survey monkey (free software tool) and the link was sent to the randomly selected 80 women, only 50 women participated in the survey, residents of different parts of Sindh province. All respondents were educated, students and working, ages between 20 to 40 and internet users. Employing the ethical considerations of a research study, research used anonymous names of the respondents. For the secondary data reports and newspapers were reviewed. Through the survey, the research identified social life variables such as lack of respect for other religions, access to education, social mobility among other religion, force to observe religious rituals, restriction on employment, lack of recreation and marital problems while the psychological life variables studied were fear, depression, nervousness, general stress, uncertainty, insecurity and feeling of aloofness among women. Data analysis was done with simple charts and tabulation using Microsoft excel.

IV. Results

i. Social Impacts

There were seven variables to measure the social impacts of extremism on women and the response shows that the religion is a core indicator of people's belief system (Sial & Anjum, 2010). Four most important areas of impact identified were: force to observe religious rituals, marital problems, lack of recreation and lack of access to education.



a) Free will Vs Force to observe Religious Rituals

Freedom is an absence of intentional inferences in the private sphere of another person (Bouillon, 2003) and liberty denotes to making choices on their own will, freedom of thought consciences is sacrificed over the extremism. Sixty two percent respondents indicated they are forced to observe religious rituals which are denial of the right to freedom and liberty.

b) Right to choose partners VS Marital Problems

The study found marital problems as the second main impact of religious extremism; families are responsible for choosing partners for their young children due to the religious extremism, it becomes difficult for the families choose partners for the children, they believe it's obligatory to select someone who must belong to same religious belief, sect and caste which is an ultimate denial of the rights of the adults who are free to choose their partners and found a family.

c) Right to rest and leisure, and right to enjoy cultural life

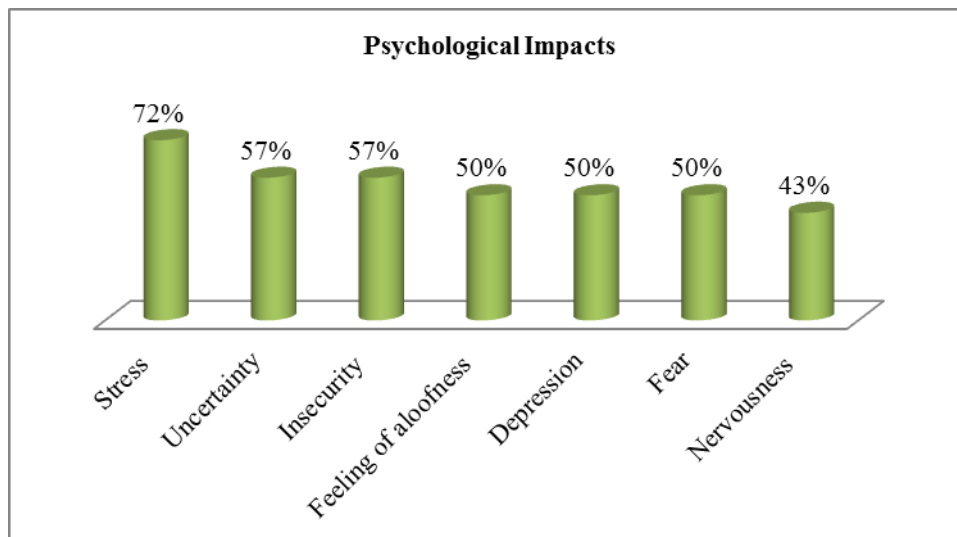
Recreational activities are not only the source of emotional well-being but also a source of developing social contacts and bonding. Fifty four percent women shared extremism has impacted on their recreational activities, forty three percent listed restricted mobility while thirty six percent identified lack of respect for other religions due to religious extremism. Restricting the activities of women within four walls of the house not only threaten their emotional well-being but also reduce the chances of social bonding which creates harmony and understanding. Forcing women to remain inside home and not participate in community activities is a denial of their right to rest and leisure, and right to enjoy cultural life.

d) Right to Education

Education increase the likelihood that women will look after their own wellbeing along with that of their family, it is also associated with power relation within and outside the household(Kabeer, 2005). Women's education is instrumental in regard of development. Fifty percent respondent of the study stated that wave of religious extremism has hindered education of women in Sindh and forty three percent claimed for the restriction on employment. There are gender specific differences among religious men and women about the kind of education girls receive, the curriculum for girls preferred which portrays patriarchal values and beliefs, mothering and patriarchal divisions of labor (Bradley & Saigol, 2012). Education and free choice of employment are the universal human rights of every individual. Unequal education and employment is not only a denial of the right to education and employment, but also unequal status and lack of economic opportunities.

I. Psychological Impacts

There were seven variables to gauge psychological impacts of religious extremism on women. The results indicate religious extremism has high impact on the psychological health of women in Sindh province of Pakistan. Seventy two percent of women respondents stated that the religious extremism has increased stress in their day to day lives. Fifty seven percent respondents mentioned that uncertainty and insecurity have impacts on women's psychological health. Feeling of aloofness, depression and fear were recognized by fifty percent respondents, while forty three percent respondents identified nervousness as an impact of extremism.



Stress not only affect our health, but also diminish our capacity of adjustment, it is associated with an increased risk of various types of physical illness ranging from digestive disorder to heart disease.

“The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on America changed everything. Before 9/11 every one felt secure at home, office and public places; but now terrorism threats to the safety and sense of security” (Grant, 2011). Similar the above situation facing the public in Sindh province. Incidents of violence on the part of the extremists, unheard of in the past, are becoming too common in Sindh (Pakistan Today, 2014). Conflict leads society towards widespread insecurity, the breakups of social structures, families and communities, and the breakdown of the rule of law (Baingana, Bannon, & Thomas, 2005). The role of social and emotional elements such as self-esteem, identity, equity and social relations has also been shown to affect the happiness and health of individuals. Most of the respondent linked psychological state with the increasing attacks on religious occasions, target killings, forced conversion of religious minority girls, internal displacements from the conflict zones and other discriminations.

Overall the responses on variables indicate a life with a more psychological pressure, which leads towards more women's health issues. “Mental health problems affect the ability of societies to generate positive social capital, a key element that enhances poverty reduction, human development efforts and the well-being of populations” (Sorel, Murthy, Mohit, Baingana, & Thomas, 2005, p. 166). States incapability of giving sense of security is not only denial of the right to free and enjoy equal right, but also right of healthy life rights and increasing women's economic dependency as they become unable to capacitate themselves with development skills and live a prosperous life.

V. Conclusion

The results of the study clearly show the negative impacts of religious extremism on the lives of women in Pakistan, which has a trickle down effect on women in Sindh. The study concludes that, women are not able to achieve their personal developmental goals as they felt no equal opportunity for them to participate fully in supporting socio-psychological environment. Agreeing with Aamrtya Sen's' capability concept that policies should focus on doing well being possible by providing the freedoms and capabilities that allow each person to achieve what will contribute to his or her own well being; Women's development is extremely influenced by the extremism issue. Violation of Women's' human, social, economic and development rights is highly associated with the religious extremism. This study urges all the stakeholder of Pakistani society, government and non-governmental organizations and women's advocacy organizations for their active role to confront the issue for enabling women to enjoy their basic human rights and participate equally in their socio-psychological and economic prosperity.

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