

Review of: "[Commentary] Commentary on Sociocultural Beliefs and Systems Restricting Women's Access to their Marital Property Rights in Pakistan"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Peer reviewer's comments:

Overall impression:

This is an interesting commentary effectively capturing the complexities of women's marital rights in the Pakistani society in a relatively short space. The paper is well documented with a rich list of references that readers can consult for further exploration of the problem at stake. Ideas flow smoothly from one section to the next, and the commentary is quite catchy in that it triggers the reader's interest in the author's argumentation and their recommendations for policy action.

Comments on Abstract:

In the abstract, the author presents the problem and explains how the paper intends to address it by (1) focusing on the dissonance and consonance states resulting from the lack of translation of positive beliefs into practical action and practice, (2) tackling the main cultural beliefs and (3) introducing the concept of empathy as a catalyst.

In the Abstract (line 1), I suggest using "sociocultural belief systems" instead of beliefs and systems.

In the last 2 lines of the Abstract, the author says: "The findings of this study"; I suggest removing the word "study" because this paper is a commentary and not a study per se.

Comments on the first section: Background

I believe it may be a good idea for the author to give their readers a quick and brief glimpse of the general situation of women in Pakistan prior to discussing the Pakistani women's marital rights in specific. Presenting some figures from the latest Gender Gap Report (2023) may be quite enlightening with respect to the striking gap between what is written on paper (articles in the Pakistan Constitution and other legislations) and what is observed in practice. According to the Gender Gap Report 2023, Pakistan is one of the 3 countries that are at the bottom of both the regional (South Asia) and global ranking tables, and "at the current rate of progress, full parity in the region will be achieved in 149 years" (Gender Gap Report, 2023, p. 6).

It is also important to inform the readers of the source of such empowering initiatives in Pakistan: is there a trace for influential women lobbying behind such initiatives and constitutional reforms? Is there a recognizable feminist activist

movement in Pakistan which has vigorously contributed to these?

With respect to the structure of this section, I advise concluding it with a short description of what the author will be arguing about so that any reader who did not have access to the Abstract can know what to expect from the commentary.

Comments on the second section: Parallel States of Cognitive Dissonance and Consonance

Line 1: Please delete “their” because it is not clear whom the author is referring to. I also feel it would be better to avoid using terms such as “positive attitudes” because what is printed on paper in terms of Constitution articles and legislations may not really reflect attitudes. Could it be perhaps more accurate to say that: Despite the promising narrative with respect to women’s rights as expressed in Constitutional articles and other legislations and initiatives, there still exists is a stark contradiction between

The author says: “Positive awareness and attitude in the community”, but does not provide us with evidence based research to confirm this positive awareness and attitude in the community. The reader needs to see the data on this, and maybe examine some of the trends within such data: is the younger generation more “positive” than the older one? Are women’s attitudes more or less positive than men’s? Are married women’s attitudes more or less positive than unmarried, single women’s? etc. The author mentions one study by Siddiqui et al. (2021) as a qualitative analysis of attitudes, but it was very difficult to locate that study. The author is thus urged to provide us with DOI to facilitate the reviewers’ and readers’ follow up on some resources. The second study the author refers to (Rubab and Usman, 2018) is also a qualitative study using in-depth interview with 30 women. It may be a good idea to warn against the limitations of both studies, namely the inability to generalize their findings to the population.

I appreciate how the author introduced the concept of cognitive dissonance from social psychology to describe the situation, however I did not quite understand the rationale behind the author’s depiction of how the same cognitive dissonance is “transformed” into cognitive consonance. Maybe the author should dedicate one or two sentences to better elucidate this particular mechanism: Could it be that *denying* the mental discomfort itself causes a mental or cognitive relief (consonance, or inner consistency) at the level of the society? And since society consists of both men and women, are we talking about the same mechanism for men and women? The author may want to further explore Festinger’s strategies for dissonance reduction.

What transpires from this section is actually the concept of prejudice against women, and as we know, one of the core sources of prejudice is social status where unequal status breeds prejudice; by continuously discriminating against women, men maintain their patronization of society.

Comments on the third section: Enculturation of Belief System

This section is very well written summary of the enculturation process. The author may want to include Allport’s discussion of religiosity across different groups (race, ethnicity, social class, etc.).

Comments on the fourth section: Epistemological Role of Power, Misogyny, and Patriarchy

In line 3, the author is advised to explain what is meant by: “objective sources”.

The author says: “popular and historical belief upheld in the country dictates that in Pakistan, as a society, women are given equal rights as men and are not subjected to mistreatment perceived to be prevailing in non-Islamic nations”. This is a very interesting statement that needs further elaboration: Here the author is implying that at the folkloric level, there is a distortion of the truth (or of religion ?— see analysis by Critelli, F. M. (2012): *Women family, law and marriage in Pakistan*). Could this popular folkloric “belief” (that women have equal rights) serve as the mechanism that buffers the cognitive dissonance discussed above? And where does this popular belief come from? Is the prevailing Pakistani *stereotype* of the highly respected mother enough to breed such folkloric beliefs about women especially that the stereotype itself is blatantly contradicted by the figures (again, please check the Gender Gap report 2023)? Could this popular belief be a “positive stereotype” or what is referred to as “benevolent prejudice” against women? I believe the author needs to reformulate their ideas in a clearer way in that otherwise very interesting section.

The last sentence of the section (starting with Furthermore...) needs rephrasing for more clarity; it is too long and somewhat confusing. I suggest breaking it down into 2 sentences.

Comments on the fifth section: Role of Empathy in Catalysing Action

I appreciate the author’s use of the Perception-Action Model (PAM) of Empathy in proposing a set of recommendations related to the marital rights of women in Pakistan. However, I believe the author should have provided the reader with a more complete interpretation of the Model (the graphic reproduction of the Model doesn’t add much to the paper if it is not properly interpreted). Instead, I suggest the author should focus on the 3 requirements for the PAM to work (as described by Preston): shared past experiences, similarity and familiarity. The author could re-direct their discussion as a function of these 3 requirements; for instance, for empathy to be activated, (1) one should invest in the shared past experiences of injustice and discrimination (by emphasizing the importance of reinforcing women’s activist groups and organizations), (2) one should promote change programs that are locally-produced, culturally competent as opposed to importing ideas from Western high gender parity cultures (to highlight the similarity of the type of program interventions with the targeted norms, standards and values), and (3) one should increase the level of awareness and knowledge of young girls and young boys related to the marital rights of women (the Written laws, particularly those protecting and guaranteeing women’s rights) to fight the ignorance and lead those youth to honor and enforce such Laws.

The author’s emphasis on women empowerment is commendable; however, the very last paragraph of this section (“fieldworkers must imperatively track women in need of support, connect them with relevant legal resources, and then track their cases to ensure that they are able to attain the marital property, they are entitled to”) does not sound consistent with this empowering approach whereby women here are represented as mere recipients of the fieldworkers’ services. Rephrasing this idea through the lens of “nothing about us without us” may be more appropriate.