

Spousal Violence against Women in the Context of Marital Inequality: Perspectives of Pakistani Religious Leaders

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Spousal violence against women is a controversial issue in Pakistan. Some religious leaders argue that “mild wife-beating” is permissible in exceptional circumstances to discipline the wife and protect the institution of the family. Some conservative religious leaders also argue that the husband has a superior and authoritative position in marital relations. This highly contested and sensitive issue acquires religious overtones and the scientific community seems reluctant to investigate it. Based on fourteen in-depth interviews, this article documents the views and opinions of religious leaders in Lahore, Pakistan, concerning spousal violence within the context of marital inequality. Rather than debating the position of Islam on spousal violence, the paper explores the minds of religious leaders who greatly influence the views of the general public.

1. Theoretical Background

Spousal violence against women has become a widely recognized international public health and human rights issue (Heise 1996; Rosenberg and Fenley 1991; WHO 1996). Spousal violence is a universal phenomenon, affecting millions of women every year (World Bank 1993). Around the world, at least one woman in every five has been physically or sexually abused at some point in time (Heise et al. 1999). Women living in developing countries, especially in high-violence societies, are even more vulnerable to spousal violence (UNICEF 2000). Like other developing countries, Pakistani society has a patriarchal structure and most of the socioeconomic space is owned and controlled by men (Jafar 2005). Because of the large gender disparities in the areas of health, education, and economic and political participation (Raza and Murad 2010), women are usually subordinated to men (Mumtaz and Mitha 1996) and are frequent victims of violence (Nasrullah, Haqqi, and Cummings 2009). Archer reports that women’s victimization rates are generally higher than

men’s in societies where women have less power and low social status (2006).

Spousal violence refers to intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing injury, harm, or death, as well as any act of psychological violence such as humiliation, forced isolation, repeated yelling, degradation, or intimidation (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005). A study found that 50 percent of married women in Pakistan are physically battered and 90 percent are emotionally and verbally abused by their husbands (Tinker 1998). Spousal violence is not only prevalent in rural areas of Pakistan but also widespread in cities such as Karachi (population 13 million) and Rawalpindi (3 million) (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2004; Fikree and Bhatti 1999; Fikree et al. 2006; Nasrullah, Haqqi, and Cummings 2009; Shaikh 2000).

By its constitution, Pakistan is an Islamic state, with a population that is 97 percent Muslim (80 percent Sunni, 17 percent Shia). Article 2 of the Constitution of the Islamic

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Republic of Pakistan states that “Islam shall be the State religion of Pakistan” no law can be enacted that contradicts the basic teachings of Quran and Sunnah (Constitution of Pakistan 1973). People usually have great trust in religious institutions like the mosque and the madrassa (religious school). Religion is not just a set of spiritual beliefs, but overwhelmingly dominates in the social, political, and personal lives of individuals (Ayyub 2000; Farmer 2007). Historically, the mosque has been a hub of social and educational activities (Haddad 1986). Almost every village and locality has a mosque headed by an imam, who is always a man. Women are not eligible to hold this position. The imam is employed and paid by the local community, and while there is no specific educational qualification he should possess the religious knowledge necessary to lead the five daily prayers and other religious rituals. An Imam usually follows a particular school of thought, such as Barlvi, Deobandi, Wahabi, Shia, etc., interpreting, practicing, and preaching religion in line with his own sectarian tradition. Although there are slight variations, all Islamic schools of thought in Pakistan uphold a conservative and patriarchal interpretations of the role and status of women.

Family counseling services by professionals like psychologists or family social workers are rare in Pakistan, and a large proportion of the population has absolutely no access to such services. Even where they do exist, many victims of spousal violence are unlikely to contact them because the problem is considered a private issue; women do not want to tell “outsiders” about the problem (Ayyub 2000). People seek guidance from the imams or religious leaders who are in close contact with the community and provide counseling services on domains of life including marriage, divorce, inheritance disputes, etc. (Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk 2005; International Crisis Group 2002).

The role of religious leaders in Pakistan is diffuse and complex. They not only lead prayers and deliver Friday sermons, but also provide a range of social and religious services (Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk 2005). For example, a local religious leader interprets and applies religious principles to day-to-day problems (e.g. how to slaughter a chicken or how to reform a deviant adolescent). Their role

varies depending upon the socio-economic status, level of education and exposure to modernity of the particular community. In modern and wealthy urban localities, the role of religious leaders is fairly limited and is restricted to leading prayers. In rural areas and in poor urban localities, the religious leader is more influential and enjoys respect and religious authority. Given the socially important role of religious leaders in Pakistani society, it was assumed that they would be the first instance victims of spousal violence would consult for help or counseling. Even in the United States, religious leaders (of all faiths) are found to be among the first to whom marital abuse is reported (Levitt and Ware 2006b; Ware, Levitt, and Bayer 2004).

The type and quality of counseling services religious leaders provide to victims has not yet been fully researched, especially in developing countries. Studies from developed countries report that religious leaders are often inadequately trained to address or intervene in cases of spousal violence (Alsdurf 1985; Bruns et al. 2005; Dixon 1995; Knickmeyer, Levitt, and Horne 2010). In developing countries religious leaders are usually taught to evaluate and analyze the problem from within their traditional patriarchal perspective and propose solutions or interventions accordingly.

Patriarchal values are historically dominant in Pakistan, and almost all the social institutions reinforce and support them (Mumtaz and Mitha 1996). Generally, conservative religious leaders espouse a male-oriented religious spirituality and reinforce male dominance in marital relations (Davidson 1978; Pagelow and Johnson 1988). That said, certain religious leaders do help the victim to resist violence by mobilizing community support and isolating the perpetrator. For example, the internationally reported gang-rape victim, Mukhtar Mai, kept silent until the local imam persuaded her and her family to file charges against the influential perpetrators (Ali 2005). Studies conducted in the United States and other Western countries also report a similar role played by religious leaders in supporting and assisting the victims of spousal violence (Alsdurf and Alsdurf 1988; Bowker 1988; Martin 1989; Popescu and Drumm 2009). Other studies also indicate that religious services can provide helpful support to battered women in

distress (Humphreys 2000) and women who suffer from mental illness (Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk 2005).

Overall, males are encouraged to control and subordinate their women (Dobash and Dobash 1979) and these beliefs are usually communicated in the religious idiom (Zakar 2004). The control and concealment of women's bodies is the most contested and controversial issue in Muslim cultures (Ali 1986; Agarwal 1994; Ayyub 2000). A majority of Muslim scholars considers that the husband should have a leadership position in marital relations, while the wife should play a subservient role (Frazier 2000). However, there is no consensus among religious leaders regarding the husband's authority to physically beat his wife. As with many other religious issues, there are many conflicting interpretations and opinions (Ammar 2007). So the emphasis placed by religious leaders on traditional gender roles and persuading victims to adhere to them is expected. This perspective is not specific to Pakistan or to Muslims; Jewish and Christian religious leaders also often provide religiously motivated counseling services to victims (Adelman 2000; Giesbrecht and Sevcik 2000; Hassouneh-Phillips 2001).

Research shows that religious authorities usually accord unequal relations to husband and wife (Daly 1973; Dobash and Dobash 1988; Wood and McHugh 1994). For example, the traditional Christian Church has always promoted male domination and accepted the rightness of the patriarchal order (Pagelow 1981). Many Muslim scholars also argue that the husband has a leading and commanding role in marital relations (Al-Qaradhawi 1997; Ayyub 2000). Across the social science disciplines, spousal violence is understood primarily as a matter of power, control, and dominance (Cooper-White 1996; Martin 1976; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Walker 1979).

As in many other Asian countries, spousal violence is not yet considered to be a serious social issue in Pakistan, despite its great prevalence and negative health consequences (Ali and Khan 2007). Despite opposition from conservative legislators, the Parliament of Pakistan enacted the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in 2009, criminalizing spousal violence and making it punishable by

fine or imprisonment (Government of Pakistan 2009). However, the impact of the law has been limited because culturally spousal violence is still considered to be a private family matter and is rarely reported to the police.

Research on spousal violence in Pakistan is still in a nascent phase. The matter is widely considered to be culturally sensitive and is therefore rarely and only reluctantly investigated. Reflecting its sensitivity, the *Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2006–07* (National Institute of Population Studies and Macro International 2008) did not contain a single question on violence against women. No nationally representative study is available and only a very few small-sample clinical surveys have been conducted by individual scientists (Fikree and Bahtti 1999; Fikree et al. 2006; Shaikh 2000). To the best of our knowledge, no study has yet been conducted in Pakistan to investigate the influence and opinion of religious leaders on the issue of spousal violence. The present study intends to fill this research gap by documenting the perspective of religious leaders on spousal violence in Pakistan. Note that we do not set out to debate Islam's position on spousal violence, concentrating instead on exploring the minds of the religious leaders who greatly influence the views of the general public.

2. Methodology

This study was a part of the dissertation project on “intimate partner violence against women and its implication on women's health in Pakistan” (Zakar 2011) The study was approved by the dissertation committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Bielefeld, Germany. In Pakistan, the study objectives and methodology were also reviewed and approved by a group of professors from the University of the Punjab, Lahore.

The study is based on in-depth interviews with fourteen religious leaders in Lahore selected using purposive sampling. Lahore is divided into nine administrative towns, and an effort was made to select at least one religious leader from each town, with success. To include the views of progressive and educated religious leaders, we also interviewed two university professors of Islamic studies and three college lecturers in Islamic studies.

In this study, “religious leader” means the imam of a mosque or a person with religious education who teaches Islam in a religious institutions such as a madrassa, in a college, or in a university. Religious leaders were contacted personally at their workplace, informed about the study and its objectives, and asked to participate. Of the thirty-four religious leaders who were contacted only sixteen (47 percent) showed an interest in participating; ten (29 percent) said they were too busy and eight (24 percent) were reluctant to talk about the issue in general. Of the 16 who originally agreed to participate, two withdrew at the time of interview. In the end, fourteen interviews were completed during an eight-week period in December 2008 and January 2009. Before the beginning of each interview, written informed consent was obtained and a written background survey was administered to gather demographic and professional information.

The study used a semi-structured interview framework to help the interviewer to follow certain topics and to explore the views of the religious leaders. Open-ended questions were formulated on the basis of previous qualitative work done as a part of the dissertation project and the review of literature on the topic. Because of cultural sensitivities, questions related only to physical and psychological violence and avoided the issue of sexual violence within marriage. Various questions were asked to elicit participants’ opinions about spousal violence. They were also asked about their experiences of dealing with cases of spousal violence and their knowledge and awareness of the health consequences of violence. All questions were worded open-ended. Questions used included: “What is your opinion about the role and status of women vis-à-vis men?”; “Do you think that men and women are equal in marital relations?”; “Do you think that a man has a right to beat his wife?”; “Do you think that spousal violence is a problem for Pakistani society?”; “How do you deal with cases of spousal violence, when women victims come to you?” The term “spousal violence” was explained as “any act of physical violence i.e., beating, kicking, slapping etc., psychological and coercive behavior perpetrated by the husband against his wife” (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005).

Cultural sensitivities precluded the female primary researcher conducting the interviews, which were instead

conducted by a male interviewer with considerable experience in qualitative interviews (the second author), in the presence of the first author. The interviews were conducted in the respondents’ first language, Urdu, and lasted one-and-a-half hour to two hours. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and written notes were taken.

2.1. Participants’ Characteristics

The fourteen interviewed religious leaders were all males. Nine were working as full-time imams at mosques, three were high school teachers of Islamic studies and two were university professors of Islamic studies. The age range was from 26 to 58 years. Almost all were married with children. The time they had been teaching religion for ranged from four to twenty-nine years. Respondents represented diverse educational backgrounds: eight had informal madrassa education, of whom three had special religious training (alim fazil); six had a university degree, of whom two had doctorates. Not a single participant reported having specialized training in wife abuse or violence-related issues.

2.2. Data Analysis

All audio-recorded in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. The transcribed materials were translated into English by the first and second authors, who both have good command of Urdu and English. Analytic induction and constant comparison methods of qualitative data analysis were carried out by systematic examination of similarities between the religious leaders’ views in order to identify emergent themes (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). After multiple readings of the transcripts, the first author first identified common themes such as male superiority in marital relations, women’s obedience, etc.; second, the themes were coded to discover the patterns; third, data were searched for similar occurrences or recurring phenomena; and fourth, findings were translated into theoretical constructs that were refined continuously until all the instances of contradictions and similarities were explained (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). In order to preserve the validity of the responses, the first author shared the initial write-up with the male interviewer, with whom she co-led all the interviews. The male interviewer provided his comments and improvements were made ac-

cording to his suggestions. Finally, the results were discussed with all the interviewees. A few of them provided clarifications of certain comments, which were incorporated into the final text.

3. Findings

The areas where we sought the opinion of religious leaders included their views on marital equality, status of husband vis-à-vis wife, and their perspective on the phenomenon of spousal violence. During the course of interviews, we tried to understand how they responded when victims of spousal violence came to them for help and advice; whether they tried to reform the perpetrator or blamed the victim. We also sought information about their perceptions of the severity and gravity of the problem of spousal violence in Pakistan and the possible impact of violence on women's health. At the end, we tried to elicit their perspective on the notions of "women's rights," "female empowerment" and "gender equality." In the following, we document their views in detail.

3.1. Marital Inequality

In response to our question regarding gender equality in marital relations, almost all the religious leaders sought to articulate a difference between the Western and Islamic concepts of "gender equality." Some (5 of 14) said that, "in general, men and women are equal." But in marital relations they considered that there was some sort of division of labor based on "natural and God-given differences," and hence equality was not possible. Most (9 of 14) argued that in an Islamic family context the husband plays a superior and authoritative role. For them, the husband acts as the guardian of his wife.

Some of the religious leaders (5 of 14) said that in order to achieve harmonious conjugal relations and a smooth functioning of family affairs the wife needs to accept her husband's superiority. Most (8 of 14) cited the example of Western industrialized countries, where, they said, the institution of the family had been destroyed as a result of women refused to accept a subordinate role. Explaining the logic of superior-subordinate relations between husband and wife, one religious leader in his mid forties, with ten years of schooling and two years' training in a madrasa, said:

After marriage, husband and wife constitute a functional unit. For the smooth functioning of the family, the wife must accept the leadership role of her husband. If both claim equality, they cannot run the family. You cannot drive a car with two drivers or with two steering wheels.

Unequal relations between husband and wife were also glorified. It was argued that subordination suits wives best. The whole discourse revolved around the popular cultural notion that "women are weak, emotional, tender, and therefore need protection." One middle-aged religious leader, with eight years of religious education but no formal schooling, argued: "Women's nature could not bear the burden of the outside world; they cannot travel in congested buses; they cannot perform manual and tough jobs." For some (4 of 14), it was an insult for a woman to go to male-dominated offices and face the harsh and harassing culture of work places.

One interviewee asked the researcher what the solution to this problem could be, and offered his own solution. He reasoned that the most natural and respectable place for a woman was within the "four walls of the house," where she can live like a queen. The responsibility of providing all the household needs rests with the husband. He continued:

Western women have rejected this household heaven, now they are in the bazaars [streets], pubs, and show-biz. They sell their services and bodies. They are being ruthlessly exploited by men. Since they are free from their guardians [fathers, brothers, and husbands] nobody helps them and nobody comes to their rescue.

While discussing the issue of marital equality, many religious leaders argued that women are equal in the eyes of Allah but lose their equality in marital relations. Almost all (12 of 14) thought that the husband should have a commanding position in the governance of the household. One religious leader in his early forties with a university degree in Islamic Studies stated:

The reason for this authority is that the husband as a male is more rational in resolving issues of family life. The wife, as a woman, is emotional in general. The wife is required to obey the commands and instructions of her husband so long as these do not involve any acts of disobedience to Allah's commands.

The two religious leaders who had doctoral degrees in Islamic studies contested that interpretation and said that Islam did not give superiority to one gender over the other. They also argued that men and women are equally wise and rational. However, most of the religious leaders (11 of 14) considered marital inequality to be natural and normal and were not willing to review their position.

It seems that most of the religious leaders inadvertently mixed religion with their local cultural beliefs and a patriarchal ideology that historically reinforces the dominance of men and subordination of women (Dobash and Dobash 1979). The sociologist Finkelhor (1983) found that the abuse of power occurs in the context of power inequalities (a more powerful person takes advantage of the less powerful). Since traditional roles imply an inequality between the sexes, the conditions are ripe for abuse (Finkelhor 1983). In many conservative religious traditions, especially in Christianity, the church unwittingly set the stage for abuse by assigning women an inferior position (Brown and Parker 1989; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Katschke-Jennings 1989; Walker 1988). The situation is similar in India, where patriarchal ideology is imposed in the name of the Hindu religion (Dhruvarajan 1990).

3.2. Religious Leaders' Opinions about Spousal Violence

Almost all the religious leaders (13 of 14) avoided the question of the permissibility of spousal violence or wife-abuse in categorical terms. Some (5 of 14) even disagreed with the very concept of “wife-beating.” They argued that the husband and the wife have a relationship with a very special structure and nature where “beating” or “not beating” is not the issue. One religious leader in his late sixties, who remarried after the death of his first wife, argued:

Husband and wife have a diffuse relationship of love and intimacy. People should not unnecessarily search for “violence” in such relations. Sometimes anger and coercion could be an expression of love. It is not a master-donkey relationship, where one can count how many times a donkey was beaten by the master.

Some religious leaders (6 of 14) thought that the wife should be cooperative and must understand her husband's

problems and limitations. One religious leader in his mid twenties who had six years of madrassa education said that: “the wife must not impose things on her husband that he cannot afford, or ask for things he is not capable of buying. And if she unwisely insists to her husband and offends him by repeated demands, the husband has the right to ‘admonish’ her.” When the researcher asked the religious leaders to define “admonish,” one said: “the husband may not necessarily use violence or coercion, but he just tries to make her realize that she may get punishment because of her unwise behavior.”

The religious leaders argued that, before imposing any physical punishment, a “wise husband” should contact the “deviant” wife's parents, local religious leaders, and other respectable family members to exert social pressure on her. One religious leader opined:

All should politely remind her about the role of an “ideal wife.” If it does not work and she clearly defies the religiously defined role, then she deserves some symbolic physical punishment.

Another religious leader with a similar point of view reasoned:

Yes, the husband has a right to show anger or to give symbolic or very mild physical punishment, but he still has no right to break her bones or inflict injuries that could render her permanently disabled.

Alluding to circumstances that could create tension between husband and wife, some religious leaders (5 of 14) thought that the wife should avoid certain social activities or otherwise face justifiable anger from her husband (and possible punishment). All agreed that “the wife should not offend her husband as offending a husband is a great sin and will not be tolerated on the Day of Judgment.” and quoted various religious authorities to support their opinion.

While explaining the social position of a wife, some religious leaders believed that an ideal wife should be discouraged from developing an independent social network and interacting with “strangers,” especially men from outside the family or men who are not known to her husband. “Unnecessary mingling with unrelated men is a sin, and

the husband has a right to forbid his wife from such activities even if he has to use some coercive methods,” one said. Three said that a husband has the right to physically beat his wife if she develops relations with *non-mehram* (males outside of the immediate family). The wife should not let down her husband by being “too independent” and “too empowered.”

University-educated religious leaders held that Islam has given women many rights which they never had before: for example, the right to inheritance, the right to divorce, the right to own and control wealth, and the right to marry a person of their own choosing. They said that the feudal economy and the influence of Hindu culture denied these rights to women in South Asia. One religious leader, with a master’s degree in Islamic Studies who also occasionally participated in TV talk shows, stated:

Islam gives many rights to women. Even in the Quran many verses talk about the treatment of women with benevolence and fairness. We should not unnecessarily highlight the issue of violence against women. It is important that we should see what rights Islam has given to wives, which no other religion or culture has given.

Two madrassa-educated religious leaders considered strict control useful for familial stability if the wife showed disregard for religious and cultural norms. They considered the issue of violence against women to be a symptom of ideological disharmony and normative chaos. One religious leader in his late fifties who taught in a local madrassa said:

I think one reason for the increasing disobedience of wives is the secularization of society. The women’s desire to attain professional status, wealth, and glamour is the gift of the Western life-style. This desire has threatened religious values as more and more women are assuming non-traditional roles. It is a dangerous tendency. She can earn money, but then she ignores her children’s upbringing. If children are deviant, what is the use of that wealth then?

3.3. Religious Leaders’ Responses to Victims of Spousal Violence

In many Muslim countries, especially in Pakistan, religious leaders are also considered “elders of the community” and people seek their advice on many religious and mundane issues (Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk 2005). The religious leaders were asked whether battered women came to them for

counseling. Half of them said that “problematic women” do come to them for a variety of reasons. Most of these (5 of 7) provide spiritual prescriptions to cope with the problem. One reported: “I provide many spiritual coping methods for the victims,” but clarified that he did not exploit or magnify the issue unnecessarily. Explaining his method of handling the victims, he said: “First I give some spiritual treatment and then remind women of their (wifely) religious obligations.” “We give advice according to sharia and we don’t care if they get angry or consider us an ally of the perpetrators,” said another. Most (10 of 14) thought that no professional or formal services were needed for victims, believing that such services made things even more complicated. For them, the best solution was that both (husband and wife) should stick to their religiously obligated roles. One religious leader in his late forties, who reported having worked as a *Haj* worker in Saudi Arabia, said:

Some NGOs are unnecessarily flashing the issue of violence for their nefarious objectives. They are not doing any service for battered women. Rather they are encouraging women to revolt from the family and the result of their unwise intervention is the disintegration of the family.

One university-educated interviewee said that religious leaders should respond positively to the victims of violence. Though women rarely came to him (he was a high school teacher of Islamic studies, not a full-time imam), he believed that religious leaders should help the women instead of giving them sermons or blaming them for their sins. Not a single religious leader reported referring a victim to a care-giving institution. Generally, they had limited knowledge of local intervention programs for battered women and lacked information about legal options and remedies.

In response to questions about wife battering cases, most religious leaders (10 of 14) suggested that women should discuss the problem with family, parents, and in-laws and seek their help. The main reason for their inability to provide intervention was lack of counseling training and mistrust of state institutions. Since they usually discussed such issues in ideological terms, they never considered treatment options, legal remedies, or counseling programs for the abusers.

The religious leaders usually gave women advice based on “doctrinal prescriptions” instead of addressing the women’s needs. Sometimes religious leaders were skeptical and critical and quick to blame the women for their difficult situation. The usual advice was to pray to Allah for a change in their husband’s behavior. While explaining the coping strategies against a husband’s violence, one madrassa-educated religious leader said: “The first line of defense is patience; patience has a huge power to conquer. With patience, the wife can win the heart of her husband.”

A majority of the religious leaders (11 of 14) laid great stress on preserving the marriage and avoiding divorce, in the process implicitly or explicitly trying to persuade the victim to tolerate the abuse. By doing so, they reinforced the myth of a “happy family” and created an imaginary cloak around the violence and terror that existed in spousal relations (Cooper-White 1996). Such reasoning is not specific to Pakistan. Muslim communities in other countries, even in the industrialized developed countries, lay great stress on keeping the family together and advise women to sacrifice their personal desires and independence in order to keep the family intact (Ayyub 2000). “Marriage for Muslim women is integral to religious and social life, many of the women ... tolerate significant abuse for many years, hoping that through faith, things would improve over time” (Hassouneh-Phillips 2001, 933).

However, two interviewees argued that women should not compromise their human dignity and security as granted by Allah and written in the Quran. One said: “If a husband is violent and abuses his wife without any reason, then she has the right to go for *khula* [divorce] and get rid of this relationship.” Another religious leader said: “If a husband abuses his wife repeatedly, she is entitled to leave the relationship.”

3.4. Denying the Problem and Blaming the Victim

Almost all the religious leaders (12 of 14) denied the significance and prevalence of the problem of spousal violence in Pakistan and refused to accept the statistics given by local research institutions and international agencies. They usually considered it to be part of a wider Western

conspiracy to malign Muslims in general and Pakistan in particular, arguing that the real violence was committed in Western cultures where men live with women without marrying and, when the women become less attractive, abandon them. For them, this was the real violence and exploitation.

Most of the religious leaders (9 of 14) place some blame on the women who were beaten by their husbands. “Yes, some men are very cruel, like wild animals; but wives too have many ‘bad habits,’” said one. Although the religious leaders talked about the equality of men and women in the eyes of Allah, they believed that men have a better understanding of things than women. Overall, most of the religious leaders had a tendency to “smell something wrong” in the women’s behavior. Although many (8 of 14) condemned the husband’s violence, at the same time they tried to place some responsibility on the victim.

3.5. Impact of Violence on Women’s Health

Almost all the religious leaders (13 of 14) knew that serious acts of violence such as “breaking bones” or scarring a body, especially the face, renders serious damage to the health of women. All were unanimous that such violence is un-Islamic and illegal. They categorically stated that the perpetrator of such violence (whomsoever it may be, including the husband) deserved no concession and must be punished by law.

Nonetheless, opinions on “mild violence” were diverse (and the religious leaders never exactly defined what “mild violence” meant). Some (6 of 14) considered that mild and “justified” violence would not have a lasting negative impact on the woman’s health, provided that the intentions of the perpetrator were not wrong. Some (5 of 14) believed that the husband should clearly tell his wife of her fault before committing even a symbolic act of violence. One religious leader stated:

She should be properly informed that she must not do a particular act. Then, despite knowing all this, if she insists on doing the “wrong things,” the husband may punish her. In such cases there would be no psychological damage to her health; it is a normal process of learning.

3.6. Freedom of Women: Fears of Conspiracies

Almost all the religious leaders considered that wives' freedom must remain within the context of religion and culture and tried to make a distinction between freedom and stubbornness. Almost all (13 of 14) believed that within the four walls of a house, the woman is free to do what she likes after performing her compulsory household duties. One religious leader who had specialized religious education (an alim fazil course) said:

The Western concept of freedom is absolutely prohibited in our religion. If freedom means sexual promiscuity, abortion, or open display of the body we reject this. These are sins clearly defined by the Holy Quran and are punishable by Islamic law. A Muslim society cannot negotiate on such things in the name of freedom.

Almost all the religious leaders began with the assumption that Islam gave many rights to women. Many argued that women had a very poor status before the advent of Islam. But Islam gave women equal rights, and in some situations women even have more rights than men. They are entitled to special status and greatly respected as mothers: "heaven lies under their feet". One religious leader said:

The Western concept of freedom is strange for us. When you talk about freedom, the question is freedom from whom? If you mean freedom from men – who are her father, brothers, husband, or sons – it is not understandable. Within the Islamic framework, men are her guardians and protectors. Freedom from them is not freedom.

Usually the religious leaders avoided answering these questions and instead began criticizing the "modernization" introduced by Western civilization. They considered that Western constructs, concepts, and mind-sets were creating "women problems" in Pakistan. For instance, they disagreed with the concept of "women's empowerment." Most considered such concepts to be "tools and techniques to humiliate Muslim cultures," and argued that efforts to empower women were a carefully designed conspiracy of Western civilization, and believed that the Western concept of empowerment will upset the entire gender balance envisioned by Islamic society. Such empowerment, they feared, will ultimately destroy the family institution.

Some religious leaders also blamed the researcher (though indirectly and politely) for working to promote the agenda of the West. One religious leader, who graduated from a famous Sunni madrassa in Punjab, said: "The Western agenda is to destroy Pakistan, not by bombs, but by using foreign-funded NGOs to destroy Pakistan's Muslim identity and convert Pakistan into a secular state." Another questioned why the Western donor agencies were funding "gender-equality projects," and questioned the hidden agenda of NGOs working on "violence against women." He advised that an educated Muslim should not fall into the trap of the Western and Jewish conspiracies. In essence, the issues related to violence against women are understood in a highly parochial and patriarchal fashion. It is important to remember that the opinions expressed within the interviews belonged to the individual religious leader and may not necessarily coincide with other leaders' views in that particular religious school of thought.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The data show considerable diversity in religious leaders' perspectives on spousal violence in Pakistan. Although the some considered mild or symbolic violence by a husband to be justified in exceptional circumstances, none of them believed that serious acts of violence such as "honor killing" or bodily mutilation (nose-cutting, limb amputation, acid throwing, etc.) were permissible. Such brutal violence is frequently reported in the media in Pakistan. So, one needs to be careful about the common stereotype that projects violence against women in Muslim societies as religiously motivated. It seems that these acts of violence are rather linked with the patriarchal structure and women's socio-economic status in society. The prevalence of violence against women also depends on the nature of gender relations, which rest on two basic perceptions: 1) women are subordinated to men, and 2) men's honor resides in the actions and behaviors of the women of his family (Lewis 1994).

In Pakistan, religious leaders do not follow a monolithic intellectual tradition. Religious leaders from different schools have different perspectives regarding the status of women, and sometimes take contradictory positions. They may exonerate the perpetrators by justifying violence and thereby hinder efforts to establish non-violent relation-

ships between husband and wife. Nonetheless, religious leaders in close contact with the community can play a positive role in providing effective counseling services to the victims of spousal violence (Bruns et al. 2005). Studies conducted in other countries on religious leaders from different faiths also report that compassionate clergy counseling can have a positive influence on psychosocial outcomes for women in abusive relationships (Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk 2005; Pagelow 1981).

Some religious leaders said that “wife-beating” meant just a symbolic threat and not real physical assault. A majority agreed in principle that a husband had the right to admonish his wife if she refused to obey him in “rightful matters.” Some religious leaders thought that beating was allowed but made the conditions so stringent that, in practice, violence could never be carried out. Nonetheless, in patriarchal societies religious precepts are misinterpreted to enhance male dominance and ensure women’s subordination. Hence, the perspective of religious leaders could be used as a justification for violence by some patriarchal men. Rotunda, Williamson, and Penfold (2004) also found that patriarchal views combined with the opinions of religious leaders could increase the use of controlling tactics by abusive men in some American communities.

Most of the religious leaders relied on their traditional worldview and local gender relations when evaluating and counseling a victim of spousal violence. It seems that most persuade the victims to “perform their religious duties” and adopt a “forgive and forget approach” instead of giving them useful advice. This approach is not limited to Muslim religious leaders; leaders from other faiths also adopt a similar attitude when it comes to spousal violence (Rotunda, Williamson, and Penfold 2004). When victims came to them for support, the clergy gave them advice based more on theological doctrine than the women’s needs (Pagelow 1981).

Under the influence of prevailing patriarchal ideas, some religious leaders tended to blame the victims, seeking fault in the women’s behavior of and blaming them for their miseries. This is consistent with the study by Levitt and Ware (2006a), who found that religious leaders from Jew-

ish, Christian, and Islamic faiths in Memphis (United States) had similar views, which resulted in them attributing responsibility for abuse to the victims instead of the perpetrators (Levitt and Ware 2006a).

Some of the religious leaders also advised women to mend or change their behavior to avoid the anger of their husbands. This advice persuades women to stay in abusive relationships and may expose the victims to repeated violence (Levitt and Ware 2006a). Similar findings are reported by Knickmeyer et al. (2003), who found that spousal violence victims reported that religious leaders had influenced them to stay in their marriages and bear the future abuse.

The qualitative data show that almost all the religious leaders considered some sort of marital inequality to be religiously permissible. However, the nature of the inequality varied and opinions diverged sharply. A majority assumed that women need the protection and guidance of men and seem to be influenced by the prevailing patriarchal culture of their society (Levitt and Ware 2006b). Attributing negative stereotypes to women, such as that women are “short tempered,” “tender,” and “emotional,” led some religious leaders to believe that women need a “specially protected place” in society and male guardians to look after them. Glick and Fiske coined the term “benevolent sexism” to explain such a situation (2001). “This set of paternalistic stereotypes about women is experienced as positive by its adherents as it places women in a revered, albeit restricted, status” (Levitt and Ware 2006a, 1188). This concept may undermine women’s self-confidence and make them permanently dependent on men (Carrillo 1993).

Like all qualitative studies, this research had some limitations. Firstly, the sample was not representative; it was based on fourteen in-depth interviews with religious leaders from urban Lahore. So the findings cannot be generalized to other religious leaders’ perspectives (especially those from rural areas). Secondly, in the context of ideological polarization of Pakistani society, the religious leaders were more interested in “defending” than “explaining” their ideas. Thirdly, it was sometimes difficult to ask probing questions because of the religious sensitivity of

the issues. Nonetheless, this study is the first of its kind and addresses very important and sensitive women's rights and human rights issue in Pakistan, and lays a good foundation for future research in this particular area.

There is ample evidence that violence, no matter how subtle or mild it may be, causes a great deal of distress and psychological damage to the victims (Stets and Straus 1990; Walker 2006). Any act of violence, be it within marital bonds or beyond, is a severe violation of human rights (Carrillo 1993; Nussbaum 2005). There are strong voices of unequivocal rejection of violence against women in Pakistan (Ministry of Women's Development 2008).

A growing body of research reports the negative implications of violence on women's physical, psychological, and reproductive health (Campbell 2002). Under pressure from international institutions and global civil society, as well as local social dynamics, the role and status of women in Pakistan is a contested issue. Pakistan has signed various international conventions prohibiting violence against women. Additionally, vocal independent print and electronic media are highlighting the problem of spousal violence and increasing public awareness of the issue.

Against this backdrop, the role and position of religious leaders is a very important influence on spousal violence in

Pakistani society. Given their control, community contacts, and social clout, religious leaders can play a positive role in reducing spousal violence by highlighting its negative human rights and health consequences. Instead of making spousal violence into an ideological or controversial issue, it is high time for moderate and conservative forces in Pakistan to find common ground on this women's rights issue (Ali 2005).

Further research with a larger sample is needed to investigate the potential role of religious leaders in helping the victims of spousal violence by providing culturally and religiously appropriate counselling services. Research should also focus on how religious leaders could effectively work together with formal care providers such as health professionals, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and lawyers. The most important thing is that religious leaders should not be neglected or ignored in violence prevention programs; their social capital and community influence should be harnessed to help the victims and reform the perpetrators. The religious leaders should be kept on board through research and training, and should be made aware that the issue of spousal violence is relevant to their role as religious leaders. The formal care-providing institutions should also be encouraged to acknowledge and recognize the importance of religious leaders and proactively collaborate with them in the battle against spousal violence in Pakistan.

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