

# COVID-19: A threat to educated Muslim women's negotiated identity in Pakistan

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This study attempts to explore how the lockdown/containment measures taken by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic have threatened educated Muslim women's negotiated identity regarding wifeness and motherhood in urban Pakistan and how they struggle to reposition to reconstruct it. Through semi-structured interviews, making an in-depth comparative study of three differently situated cases (Muslim women), this study argues that the abnormal situation that has ensued from the pandemic has reinforced the vulnerability of women's nascent negotiated identity by landing them in a space where they are supposed by the normative structures to step back to carrying out their traditional responsibilities as 'good' wife and mother during the crisis. It has found that the pandemic has similarity in its impacts for the women in their familial lives, despite their being variously situated and resistive, due to the general religio-culturally defined patriarchal social behaviour of the place (Pakistan) toward women and lack of action on the part of the state for implementing its laws of women's empowerment.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19, identity, motherhood, Muslim women, Pakistan, wifeness

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The world has scrambled to deal with the multidimensional impacts of the cataclysmic COVID-19 pandemic which first erupted in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and spread across the world within weeks (at the time of writing in the last week of March 2020 the virus has claimed about 30,000 lives and has infected hundreds of thousands of

people across the globe; the virus is still spreading and casualties multiplying with no medicine to cure it so far). Though statistics reported in the media have shown men in greater number as victims of the pandemic, the effects of the virus cannot be taken as limited to just physical illness or mortality. There is a need to study the outbreak with reference to its impact on women in terms of increased aggravation of unpaid labour, domestic and sexual violence, reproductive health, issues of pregnancy and maternity, and economic burden. There is hardly any published academic research on the impact of COVID-19 on women regarding how it has worsened gender issues. Pandemics like COVID-19 can have severe and long-term gender impacts for women, especially in religio-culturally inspired patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Informed by the little feminist research focused on the impacts of the Zika and Ebola epidemics (the diseases that struck South and North America and Africa during 2013–2016), this study, from the feminist perspective, attempts to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Muslim women in Pakistan. Ebola in Africa resulted in long-term destructive consequences for women by affecting their life chances as many of them had to drop out of school; teenage-pregnancy rates increased, domestic and sexual violence grew, women's health deteriorated and the rate of women dying due to obstetric complications rose (Farmer, 2014; Lewis, 2020; Marindo, 2017). Zika epidemics, in Latin America, were exacerbated due to the lack of reproductive rights of women in that patriarchal society which had deep structural economic inequalities for its women (Velez & Diniz, 2016).

To contain the spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 virus, Pakistan's federal and provincial governments closed down all schools, colleges and universities across the country from 11 March 2020 to 31 May 2020. All types of international, national, inter-city and intra-city travel were banned; shopping malls, businesses and all types of public gatherings were prohibited; along with other law enforcement agencies, the army was deployed to force people to stay at home. The lockdown period was extended to 7 April 2020, which could further be increased in view of the spread of the virus.

Muslim women in Pakistan have long struggled to negotiate their gender identity in the religiously inspired patriarchal sociocultural structures of the postcolonial globalized nation state that came into existence (in 1947) in the name of Islam (details in the following section). This study attempts to explore how the lockdown/containment measures taken by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic have threatened educated Muslim women's negotiated identity regarding wifehood and motherhood in urban Pakistan and how they struggle to reposition to reconstruct it. Through semi-structured interviews, making an in-depth comparative study of three differently situated cases (Muslim women), this study argues that the abnormal situation resulting from the pandemic has reinforced the vulnerability of the women's nascent negotiated identity by landing them in a space where they are supposed by the normative structures to step back to carrying out their traditional responsibilities as 'good' wife and mother during the crisis. It has been found that the pandemic has similarity in its impacts for the women in their familial lives, despite their being variously situated and resistive, due to the general religio-culturally defined patriarchal social behaviour of the place (Pakistan) toward women and lack of will and action on the part of the state for implementing its laws of women's empowerment. The pandemic for the women has resulted in the form of increased burden of unrecognized unpaid domestic labour and domestic violence which, as a result, has caused them mental stress and apprehension regarding the loss of the identity that they had long negotiated their religio-traditional structures to achieve. Within the framework of the case study methodology, the data from the interviews is properly coded and categorized for their thematic analysis. Though gender-defining intersectional factors like social status, class, education, economic independence, locality, interpretation of religion and physical beauty usually intervene to influence a woman's empowerment in the family, this study finds that, in addition to the influence of these factors, the general dominant social behaviour toward women and the lack of will and action/infrastructure on the part of the government to ensure women's empowerment are major factors which even worsen their condition during a crisis like COVID-19.

## 2 | POSITIONING GENDER OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN PAKISTAN

Muslim women in Pakistan have never been able to get rid of being viewed as symbols of the religiously rooted national and postcolonial culture in which they have to embody and enact the modest and pious Muslim lady as a

daughter, sister, mother and wife. They are supposed by the nationalist and dominant social discourse to look 'Muslim' and not 'western'; westernization is deemed as being vulgar and obscene. Social, political, cultural, religious and economic structures of Pakistan see its women as caregivers at home and have deep gender disparities. However, cultural and economic globalization and increasing geographic and non-geographic physical and intellectual mobility of women can also be felt through its effects on changing lifestyles and social spaces (Safdar & Ghani, 2018).

Though a number of factors like class, region, locality, ethnicity, social status, age and historical specificity have intersected to define and position gender of Muslim women in Pakistan, the intervention of religion and state discourses has always had, throughout the country's history, a major influence on the construction of the perceptions and expectations associated with gender (Jafar, 2005; Jamal, 2006; Julia, 2013; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Shaheed, 2010; Yasmin, Naseem & Sohail, 2019; Yasmin, Naseem & Raza, 2018; Yasmin, et al., 2019; Zia, 2018). Religious and state discourses, though varied across various government configurations (democratic and dictatorial), have been key to forming general social behaviour and the state's policy toward determining female spaces. The moderate social space women gained through their active participation in the struggle for independence of the nation during the 1940s reduced after independence in 1947 and then was drastically curtailed in the name of Islam by the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s (Saigol, 2016; Suleri, 1992). The state promulgated such legislations (including *Zina* and *Hoodoo* ordinances) and initiated such public discourses (people could act as vigilantes to judge and police the character of women) that have continued to victimize women. Women Action Forum (WAF), led by upper-class women following the politics of secular feminism, protested against the regime of Zia for its women-biased public discourse and policies, and demanded equality of women. WAF, though struggled hard for the democratic rights of women and other suppressed communities, failed to attract common women largely due to the dominant religiously inspired social behaviour toward women. Its problems in forwarding its agenda multiplied in the aftermath of 9/11, when it became usual in Pakistan to label secular feminist struggles with the stigma of westernization of the society. Feminism, having been ambivalently interpreted by the majority of people in the country, has been in retreat; instead, a third space enabling women to negotiate the oppressive indigenous religio-cultural patriarchal structures and western notions of women's equality has increasingly opened for women to negotiate their space (Akhtar, 2014; Mansoor, 2014; Safdar & Ghani, 2018; Zubair & Zubair, 2017). As a reaction to secular perceptions of gender, religion-based struggle for women's rights has been advocated by academics as the alternative indigenous agency that does not necessarily mean to subvert patriarchy in the sense that secular feminism means (Iqtidar, 2011; Mahmood, 2005; Syed, 2010).

The pre- and post-Zia era state policies exploited relatively moderate versions of religious interpretations to forward their political and economic agendas. General Pervez Musharraf's regime (1999–2008) included religious political parties in the coalition government and advocated cultural enlightenment and women's rights. Successive governments after Musharraf have also introduced several women-friendly legal measures. However, the recently reignited discursive conflict between secular and religious viewpoints about Muslim women's gender roles and rights in Pakistan by the Marvi Sarmad (a Pakistani feminist activist) and Khalil ur Rehman (a playwright) episode (DAWN, 2020a, 2020b) has revealed that the majority of people in Pakistan view gender of Muslim women through the perspectives of their religion and local culture rather than secularism.

Women's visibility and mobility have been growing across the country, and as a result, their intellectual mobility as well in the form of an increasing sense of reasoning and critical thinking. However, they mostly seek their agency from interpretations of religion, especially in the case of middle-class women (Khurshid, 2015). The state, in the last two decades, has also passed a number of pro-women legislations to punish the perpetrators of honour killings, domestic violence and sexual harassment, and to empower women in matters related to divorce and marriage (DAWN, 2016; Mirza, 2011). However, what is missing is the will, readiness, proper training and consistency in action on the part of the state institutions to implement these laws (DAWN, 2020a, 2020b). It has resulted in scattered, disorganized and haphazard growth in social behaviours towards gender in the contemporary Pakistan which is globalized and also always mindful of the reason of its being (that is, religion).

### 3 | RESEARCH SETTING

The COVID-19 pandemic and the asymmetric condition of gender in hardcore patriarchal societies like Pakistan form the background of this study. The study conducts purposive sampling to explore the impact of the pandemic on the familial life of those Pakistani Muslim (single parent and double parent) women who are highly educated, comparatively less educated (grade 10–12), economically independent/dependent and located in urban areas in Pakistan. It is generally assumed that educated and economically independent women located in urban areas exercise comparatively greater agency than uneducated and economically dependent women who are located in rural/remote areas. This is why this study attempts to explore the experience of the educated and economically independent (and dependent as well) women who are located in urban areas to understand how the women have to struggle to maintain their relatively better position regarding their rights/agency in the times of pandemics like COVID-19. All the three cases selected for this study are from Sialkot. Sialkot is an industrial city located in the province of Punjab in Pakistan; after the metropolises: Karachi, Lahore and Faisalabad, it is the fourth city in the country that has high per capita income. Case study methodology, as explained in Hood (2009), provides a useful entry point to explore the experiences of the women through their personal narratives; narratives constitute and can help understand one's identity (Neitz, 2004; Wuthnow, 2011). Since the authors are also married and going through similar experiences as the cases are in their familial life during the containment measures, self-reflexivity as a method, which is often employed by feminist research (Alldred, 1998; Birch, 1998; Parr, 1998; Zubair, 2005; Zubair & Zubair, 2017), is also used to feel a connection with the research participants and to research *with* rather than *on* them. As typical with Linguistics and Discourse Studies, language is constitutive and expressive of one's identity; this study therefore attempts to investigate and capture the lived experiences of the Muslim women through their talks.

The following prompt was used to initiate the semi-structured individual interviews which lasted over an hour each and also included informal irrelevant exchanges of ideas and gossip:

*How are you doing during these lockdown/containment measures by the government?*

Since the interviews were recorded, the relevant material was later noted down and transcribed for the study. Two of the cases (both of them women and coded as Nisa and Rida) and the authors have been serving as colleagues in the same university in Sialkot for several years, and have visited each other's families many times. Therefore, the authors position themselves with respect to the two participants as colleagues and friends who have a deep understanding of each other's familial situations and can share their experiences confiding in each other. The third case (also a woman coded as Nayab) for this study is a relative of ours with whom also we can position ourselves in a situation where there is mutual confidence and trust and deep knowledge of each other's familial experiences. Though the authors' positionalities with the participants are such that they have mutual confidence, trust and deep knowledge of each other's familial and personal lives, the first author, being a male, may have to be more reflective and empathetic to understand the women participants' sensibilities. However, this sexual opposition of the author enables him to be more interested and curious to explore the experiences of the women. The second author, being a woman, can better feel with the women participants and helps the first author to feel the same by explaining to him the situations of the participants.

#### 3.1 | Rida

Rida is a single parent, parenting her five-year-old daughter after her divorce two years ago. She is in her thirties, living with her parents in their own home after her divorce. She is the only daughter of her parents and has no siblings. Her parents are over 60 years of age and need someone to take care of them. Her family environment is not that strict in religious matters like dress and rituals, etc. She wears cultural (Shalwar Qameez) and modern

dress also (like pants and loose shirts). However, she wears a scarf which is a symbol of modesty and piety in Pakistan. Being a senior management officer, her monthly salary is sufficient to lead a respectable middle-class life. Her father's retirement pension also adds a considerable amount to her monthly budget. For household chores like cooking, washing and cleaning, she has a female servant. During workdays, she spends nine hours a day at the university campus, and back at her home the servant takes care of her household chores and parents; her daughter is dropped off and picked up from school by the school van. During the COVID-19 outbreak, she has spent all of her time at home looking after her daughter and parents. As culturally and religiously expected, she personally takes care of most of the services of her parents and daughter even when the servant is also available.

### 3.2 | Nisa

Nisa is a double parent having three sons and no daughter. She is in her forties and lives with her husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law. She is highly educated (18 years of education) but the level of her husband's education (14 years education) is lower than hers. Being a university lecturer she is financially independent; her husband also runs his own small private business. She belongs to the middle class. Her eldest son is 20 years old and the youngest 16; all three of them are students at different levels and can travel to and back home from their schools on their own. Her family environment is religiously and culturally fundamentalist. With the purpose of avoiding obscenity and irreligiousness, they do not even have a television at home. Though she is allowed to travel alone to the university campus, which is only a mile away from her home, she first used to wear a full head-to-toe veil (abaya), however, latter, for a few years she has negotiated her veil and now wears a complete head scarf instead of the head-to-toe veil. The authors have never seen her wearing pants and shirts; she dresses according to religious and cultural norms. For household chores, she has a female servant. During workdays, she usually spends five to six hours a day at the university campus and the rest of the time she spends with her family at home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she has had to spend all of her time at home with her family.

### 3.3 | Nayab

The third case coded as Nayab is a woman in her thirties with two children (a five-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son). She is comparatively less educated (she has ten years of schooling) than the other two cases in this study and is not financially independent. She is a housewife. However, her husband is highly educated (he has 18 years of education) and has a job as a senior management officer in a local private organization. Her family environment is not culturally and religiously fundamental, however, she has always been seen wearing culturally appropriate clothing and is traditional in her views about lifestyle. She does all the household chores herself, however, during the last few weeks of her pregnancy and the initial weeks after giving birth to her two children, she hired a female servant for the household chores. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her husband spends most of his time at home doing his professional work online through Internet and mobile phone services.

To study the experiences of the participants, the authors have come from the position of moderate, educated Pakistani Muslims who believe in the progressively negotiated identity of Muslim women that resists universalist as well as indigenous traditional oppressions.

In the following sections, major themes that were identified through regressive and recursive readings of the transcripts are analysed. Our analysis is informed by the feminist assumption that the non-traditional agency of women, like the one that comes from their mobility and economic independence, in patriarchal societies, easily falls vulnerable to curtailment during moments of national crisis, and they are mostly supposed to step back to their conventional gender roles.

## 4 | COMPROMISED IDENTITY AND MENTAL STRESS

One of the major themes that transpired from the data is the compromised identity and frequent mental stress that all the three cases under study have experienced in their respective familial environments during the lockdown period. Doing jobs, Nisa and Rida had become accustomed to such an environment which they considered was professional and in which they used to think and act professionally as useful and empowered persons of the society. But the lockdown shut them in homes rendering them traditional mothers and caregivers while facing harsh behaviours of their male life-partners which added to the mental stress they were already suffering from because of the widespread fear of the pandemic. Nisa says:

*I am just struggling to adjust in the new situation as being away from the professional things and all the time worried about my own and my family's health in these times of the plague. It has been hardly a week since we stopped going to the university, but I do not remember even a single day when I did not feel as if imprisoned in the four walls of the house being mentally tormented by the almost daily harsh behaviour of my husband. It has been frequent with him to scold me for not properly upbringing my sons. As if he keeps looking for excuses to taunt me for one thing or another. I always try my best to avoid behaving badly with him but it makes me mentally upset. He is always respectable for me but conflicts between us have become frequent since last week.*

It is signified by the above excerpt that though Nisa has multiple coexisting positions and identities as an educated, economically independent, professional Muslim married woman, what ultimately dominates her, during these times of national calamity, is her identity as a 'good' wife and mother; the rest have to be compromised and even suppressed, at least for the time being. Though the educated, professional and economically empowered positionalities and identities enable her to discern the patriarchal suppression and negotiate the religio-culturally defined 'pari likhi' (educated) wife and mother makes her behave patiently and modestly, corresponding with the findings of Khurshid (2015) about educated Muslim women in an ethnographic study in Pakistan. Being an educated Muslim woman in Pakistan implies a privileged social position entitled to claiming power in decision-making in familial matters, but these educated women feel greater social pressure to abide by the Islamic morality and struggle *within* rather than without the institutions of family, culture and religion (Khurshid, 2015). Zubair and Zubair (2017) argue through personal narratives of their research participants (Muslim women educated in English literature in Pakistan) that multiple positionalities and identities, like the one seen in Nisa, enable women to negotiate in the third space by being resistive to the local religio-culturally defined patriarchal structures and the western concepts of women's autonomy. However, the situation wherein Nisa is operating is unusual which has triggered reinforcement of traditional norms in familial environments which expect her to conform rather than to resist or negotiate. People have turned more religious, intended to please God to forgive them and end His wrath that has struck them in the form of the pandemic; this general behaviour of the society also makes its imprint on familial environments. Being a 'bad' wife or mother by resisting her traditional normative duties may not be afforded in these times of hyper-religiosity of the society. Fighting against and suppressing her identity as an empowered and intellectually mobile woman while embodying like a good wife and mother has created unusual psychological pressure for her.

Similarly, Rida says:

*I don't have to cook much or make the daily chores as my maid does all these things. But what makes me upset is the feeling that this disease seems to have imprisoned me in my home and made me feel like the traditional woman that I have always fought against to make myself. I look after my daughter's nutrition and study and then the entire time spends with my parents.*

Rida, though a single parent who divorced her husband years ago and has only one daughter and parents to take care of, has started feeling like the traditional woman who is just supposed to stay at home and look after familial domestic matters. She feels that the identity that she had negotiated for herself as an independent professional woman has come under threat through the containment/lockdown measures.

Nisa says:

*I feel as if this disease is the new super authoritarian man that has been fast rendering me powerless and reduced to femininity. I do try to find some time to read books, and to answer the queries of my students who keep sending me messages through WhatsApp about their studies. However, you really have to grapple to find some time for such things.*

Nisa personifies COVID-19 as the super authoritarian man that has continuously been rendering her deprived of her power to negotiate the traditional patriarchal norms and assert herself. She has to continuously remind herself to situate her thinking, feelings and actions within the sociocultural structures of her family which are hyper-conservative. Her mobility for her paid job does not mean that the social and familial norms have undergone some drastic and established change. Though cultural fluidity giving rise to women's mobility and less conservative social spaces in the contemporary globalized Pakistan cannot be denied, its effects are still restricted mostly to the private lives of people rather than seen generally in the society (Safdar & Ghani, 2018). Despite shifts in their identity due to their multiple social positions, women in Pakistan have to embody traditional gender perceptions while in public spaces. The identity of these women is precarious and vulnerable to challenges due to their being in multiple social positions, locations and roles that are contradictory. As Mouffe (1993) notes:

*The identity of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those positions and dependent on specific forms of identification. It is therefore impossible to speak of the social agent as if we were dealing with a unified, homogeneous entity. We have rather to approach it as a plurality, dependent on the various subject positions through which it is constituted within various discursive formations. (p. 77)*

Zubair and Zubair (2017) call it frontstage and backstage identities when educated Muslim women in Pakistan have to behave and act differently in their public and private lives and/or while in different social spaces. But being at frontstage and backstage is not devoid of mental stress, at least in the cases of Nisa and Rida who, after having learnt to think critically and negotiate their identity, have to step back and dormant their faculties of reasoning and negotiating just to conform to the traditional and dogmatic normative structures.

Nayab's situation, however, is pretty different from Nisa and Rida. Being an average educated housewife with a husband who is more interested and involved in his professional matters than those of home, she is happy performing her household responsibilities regarding looking after and feeding her two children, and cooking, washing and cleansing. She has negotiated her position as a responsible wife and mother and therefore claims a considerable decisive power in household matters. This negotiated position comes under threat when her husband has to stay at home all the time due to the lockdown/containment measures of the government. She articulates:

*His [her husband's] rebukes have increased in frequency and severity. Previously, it was just sometimes that he taunted me for my being less intelligent and educated. I know that I'm not as much educated as he is. But I can take care of my home very well, and I've told him this. During his stay at home, losing temperament even on tiny matters like noise of the children and then taunting me of not being able to keep them quiet has grown with him.*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Nayab used to use her ability and skills of taking care of her home, husband and children as her agency to negotiate and resist the domineering influence and superiority of her husband's education and provision of financial resources. With a few exceptions, her husband too regarded her for her skills as a good caregiver. However, the newly emerged situation in which they have to live together inside the home for weeks has made her husband even question her very ability that had enabled her to negotiate her identity.

All the three women, though situated differently and having different positionalities and identities, have similarity in the perceived threats to the identity that they had taken years to develop; and these perceived threats are a cause of their mental stress. However, they do not simply submit as a way of surrendering, rather they reposition themselves and re-resist through various changed tactics.

## 5 | STRUGGLES TO RE-POSITION AND RE-RESIST

Understanding the sensitivity of the unusual circumstances under the pandemic lockdown and taking her husband's stay at home as just temporary, Nayab uses her silence, submission and even greater consciousness of her wifely and motherly duties as a wilful strategy to counter the domineering behaviour of her husband. Her silence is not a helpless or unthoughtful surrender but a strategy to pull herself off the conflict and prove through her behaviour and action that she is more in control of her temperament, behaviour and treatment to others. However, she does feel the pain her husband's growing misbehaviour has caused her. Nayab says:

*I don't indulge in conflicts with him, I keep silence and leave him raging; this is how I don't let things worsen. My silence silences him. Though I feel upset but I mind my own business even more carefully.*

The use of silence by Nayab to silence her raging husband is strategic, agentive and resistive. It is in correspondence with the findings of Bartkowski and Read (2003) about wifely submission of Christian female participants; it is also resonant of the findings of Zubair and Zubair (2017) regarding agentive silence of Muslim women to their husbands in the patriarchal religio-cultural society of Pakistan. If not discursively, psychologically and behaviourally she resists the patriarchal oppressive measures of her husband.

Perhaps due to being positioned in the financially and socially disadvantaged position, Nayab (as she is economically dependent on her husband and is less educated) makes comparatively greater use of silence as agency than Nisa and Rida. They have been found using their knowledge and information of the updated developments in Pakistan and across the world regarding the pandemic as a strategy to negotiate and resist the sudden patriarchal clampdown on them. Though Nisa endeavours to comply with the heightened religio-cultural traditional responsibilities of her as a wife and mother, she, as a way to be agentive, finds time to take part in informative discussions with her husband, sons and in-laws. Rida also often keeps updating her parents of the latest impacts of the pandemic and what the government is doing as a result. It enables them to resist against the patriarchal structures that have pushed to narrow their gender space. They discursively open and expand a space for them in which they have power in the form of information, knowledge and critical thinking which agentively repositions them against the traditional expectations of the patriarchy. Being situated in a socially advantageous position (highly educated and economically independent), Nisa and Rida are agentive not only psychologically but also discursively, through silence as well as discourse. Further, Nisa being the mother of three sons (giving birth to a son in a patriarchal society empowers the mother by enhancing her respect and value in her family and society) possesses another point of leverage. On the one hand, her religio-culturally fundamentalist family environment curtails many of her human rights; on the other hand, she, being very knowledgeable in Islamic teachings about Muslim women's rights, embeds her agency in religion. She resists her husband's oppressive manoeuvres through silence as well as discourse that are supported by her stance in religion. Her agency is neither of the type that Mahmood's (2005) women exercise through their piety, nor is it of the type of Islamic feminism which reinterprets Quranic text from a feminine perspective (Barlas, 2013).



Rida's comparatively less conservative environment than that of Nisa and her having no husband to domineer her also enables her to easily create a space for herself. However, being a divorced middle-aged woman she also has to be careful regarding her modesty and piety in society as she is more likely to be seen by others to be having an illicit relationship. Nayab's domestic environment is also not conservative; also, she is not in a socially disadvantageous position regarding the sex of her children as she has given birth to a daughter and a son. However, perhaps what makes her seek recourse to silence rather than to discourse is her being comparatively less well equipped with knowledge that could have empowered her in discourse as well. The identity of each of these three women is contingent on the conjuncture of a number of intersecting factors defining their gender. Being (re)situated in their respective historical specificities, they appropriate and reconstruct their religious, cultural and feminist ideals to negotiate their gender space.

## 6 | GRIEVANCES AGAINST THE STATE

Nisa articulates:

*The mental stress coming to us [women] from the bad behaviours of our husbands has to be endured by us; because this is what the society generally expects us to do; and even the state seems connived with men. Otherwise, it would have done something practically. It does not bother about its women even in normal conditions; how it can do in such circumstances when everyone is so concerned about the coronavirus.*

Nisa supposes men, the state and the dominant social behaviour toward women as being in connivance with each other in the form of a nexus to ensure enforcement of patriarchal power structures. Though by her religious and cultural orientation she does not consider it appropriate for a Muslim woman in Pakistan to complain to state institutions against her own husband for minor abuse or torture, she highlights the need for the availability of and ease of access to such state institutions whom a woman can conveniently approach for justice if she feels she is being seriously tormented by her husband or in-laws. Despite being highly educated and being in professional jobs, both Nisa and Rida do not know the existence of any state institution or even a helpline in their city that is especially available to rescue a woman if she is under threat of any kind. It corresponds with the observations of DAWN (2020a, 2020b) that the state has introduced several legislations over the previous two decades to protect women's rights. However, due to the lack of proper planning and allocation of resources for the implementation of these legislations, the condition of women has not changed much; even a dominant majority of women is unaware of these laws. It seems the patriarchal core of the nature of the state institutions has not changed; consistent implementation, training of state institutions and change in social behaviours are still things a long way off. The Pakistani state being actively involved in defining and shaping the gender of its Muslim women became glaringly obvious during General Zia's regime, whose impact can still be felt in its various forms including extremist religious ideologies regarding Muslim women's identity in public spaces (Jamal, 2006, 2009; Rouse, 2004; Saigol, 2016; Suleri, 1992; Zia, 2018). In the last few decades, the state has passed several such legislations (perhaps under the pressure of its western donors that want to see gender equality) that are pro-women, but lack of coherence in their implementation indicates the level of seriousness on the part of the state. Even in normal situations in the country, the appropriated and reconstructed identity of educated, working, mobile Muslim women remains vulnerable to the patriarchy's whims; abnormal situations like COVID-19 just add to its vulnerability in which women find no option other than to succumb and/or reposition themselves depending on their own specific situations. In a society where there does not exist in normal conditions the generally accepted social practice to approach the state for matters like domestic violence, women perhaps cannot even imagine doing so during the pandemic-like national crisis which traditionally demands them to be more 'cooperative' to their men.

Nayab says:

*It is good that there should be some institution to complain; at least we are also human beings. I've heard about some women who were even killed by their husbands and in-laws.*

When asked if she would complain against her husband, she says:

*No, not at all. I do not mean to complain against my own husband when I talk about these laws. I was just talking about them, not meaning to actually approach them. It is not fair. I can't even imagine it. It's not a practice here in our society. These are hard times on us. Doing so will be highly unfair.*

Though Nayab is aware of her rights as a human being and is worried about the mental torture given to her by her husband's growingly oppressive and insulting behaviour, she does not think it appropriate to complain about it to the state because doing so is socially unacceptable. Like most other states, the Pakistani state has also played a major role in shaping the social behaviour of its people; in Pakistan, patriarchal interpretations of religion and culture have greatly inspired the state's policies focused to regulate social behaviours. Nayab's predicament can be described as a typical example of many of those Muslim women in her situation who are conscious of their oppression but are unarmed and revert back (by the overtly/covertly state-supported social behaviours) to their traditional strategies of resistance that are silence and psychological agency, rather than 'rhetorical agency' which is seen on the part of Nisa and Rida to re-construct new subject positions for them (Sinha, 1999, p. 208).

## 7 | CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the chances of vulnerability of the negotiated identity and social space of middle-class educated Muslim women in urban Pakistan get heightened in situations like COVID-19 mainly due to the religiously inspired dominant patriarchal social behaviours and the state's inability to practically empower its women during normal conditions. Though neither the abnormal pandemic conditions are to stay as permanent, nor the women in these situations, what gets exposed is the nascence of their negotiated identities and social spaces which are contingent on the intersectional social structures and conditions. The psychological scars of Nayab and Nisa due to their husbands' oppressive and even insulting behaviour may get stored in their unconscious and not be healed for a long time, and can also leave a long-lasting impression on their children's psyche and behaviour as well. Given the dominant general social behaviour towards the state's treatment of gender, what is considered of paramount importance by all the three women, during the abnormal pandemic circumstances, is to conform to the normative structures while innovating new forms of re-positioning and re-negotiating their identity in their respective contexts. Gendered social behaviour, the state's policies and women's identity are interlinked. The study also reveals that awareness, education, mobility, religiosity and economic self-dependence intersect (variously according to their contextual setups) to re-enable the women to re-negotiate their traditional gender identity as wife and mother, re-position and re-construct their subjectivities even during the stressful times. They take care of their families and perform their wifely and motherly duties as well as innovate ways to re-position themselves to seek agency.

This study indicates that if educated urban women feel the social pressure to step back to their traditional patriarchal roles while bearing domestic violence as well, the situation of those living in remote/rural areas or less empowered women could be much worse. The nexus of religiously inspired patriarchal social behaviour and the state's callousness regarding implementation of its laws renders women suppressed.

Given the religiously disguised violent reaction of the local patriarchal elements to feminist voices in Pakistan, the authors, throughout this study have felt the normative pressure not to speak about the issues related to the women participants' sexuality which are cultural taboos. The findings and conclusion of this study enable the first author, whose gendered perspective repeatedly intervened to demand closer insights and empathy in order to feel and understand the participants' situations, to get insight into the underlying religio-culturally disguised patriarchal

oppressions of which he himself, consciously or unconsciously, at least partly, had been a part. However, the author has progressively been moderate, advocated and voiced for the rights of Muslim women in Pakistan.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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