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The Nexus between Critical Feminism and Determinants of Feminism in Pakistan: An Exploration of Intersectionalities and Power Dynamics

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Abstract

The present study explores the nexus between determinants of feminism and Critical Feminist theory in Pakistan. The focus of the study is to analyze how gender intersects with the various forms of oppression, like class, patriarchal norms, gender roles, culture, religion, political and economic marginalization, violence against women, sexuality, and ability, etc., to have unique experiences of gender discrimination. Critical feminism focuses on power dynamics, patriarchy, intersectionality, social justice, etc., which curtails deconstructing dominant narratives and highlighting, marginalized voices of Pakistani citizens. The objective of the present study is to examine how critical feminist theory inspects and shapes Pakistani feminist movements. It was a qualitative study. This research was conducted through textual analysis. The results of the present research showed that the complex power dynamics and intersectionalities have created challenges towards patriarchal norms and religious justification for gender-based discrimination, while it is also navigating the complexities of determinants of feminism in Pakistan, such as class, culture, political, economic, and religious factors, which are dominated by the marginalization of women in Pakistan. It also highlights that despite the presence of Islamic teachings and laws, women have experienced discrimination in all aspects of women's rights in Pakistan.

Keywords: Critical Feminism, Intersectionality, Power Dynamics, Gender- Based Oppression, Feminist Movements.

Introduction

Globally, the population shares an equal distribution of gender. Gender is the biological aspect that determines one's shape by power and authority. Queer theory is a framework that explores the methods through which gender and sexuality are socially constructed. Feminism revolves around the equality of rights and opportunities for all genders (Earles, 2017). It focuses on respecting the diverse experiences, identities, knowledge, and strengths of women, while working to empower all women to achieve their complete rights (Roland, 2018). Pakistan, a patriarchal society with a complex web of social, cultural, and political dynamics, presents critical feminism and Pakistani feminism as important components of Islamic perspective and modern-day research (Mahmood, 2005). Critical feminist theory denotes the concepts including sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, differences, and choices (Tong, 1998).

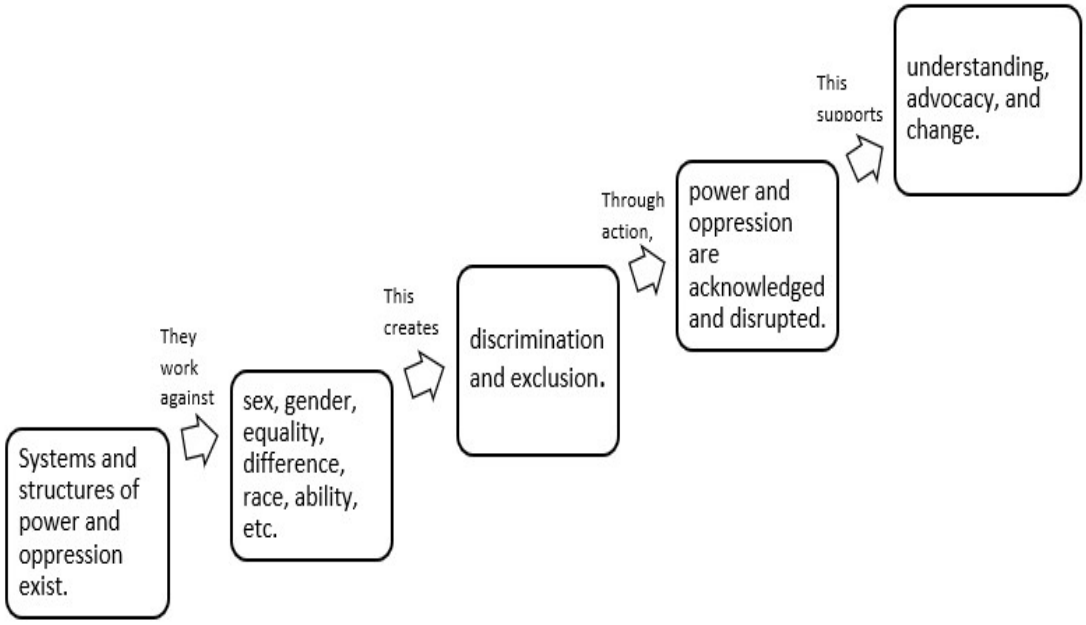
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However, feminism holds the construction of intersectionality, dimensions of social life, social inequality, and social transformation (Bohren et al., 2024). Also, the Queer theory suggests that gender is flexible and subject to change. Judith Butler argues that gender is performative, which means the performance of gender makes gender exist. Also, she debated that feminism doesn't adapt the women of a certain tribal group or social class but includes women from all intersections, as well as individuals with social differences. Her reasoning created a foundation for criticism, and different debates arose within the feminist movement (Butler, 2002). Crenshaw introduced the theory of intersectionality. She argued that intersectionality is essential to understanding the effects of social discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality is a key concept in feminist theory that emphasizes how various social identities intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It highlights the struggles faced by women of different social categories and systems of power (Saeed & Khan, 2025).

> *Power dynamics refers to the relationships between people working in an association. It is the distribution of the formal authority that affects human behavior (Amber & Khadija, 2024). Anzaldua (1981), Hooks (1984), and other critical feminists refer to the relationships between people and social institutions. It emphasizes the distribution of formal authority and how that affects people's behavior. It includes patriarchy, intersectionality, ableism, ageism, economic power, religious power, state power, etc.* (Far et al., 2024).

Patriarchy denotes a social structure in which men hold primary power and dominance over women and other members of a family (Ali et al., 2022). It displays in various social structures of society, including family structures, workplaces, and cultural norms (Ali & Malik, 2014). Critical feminism, with its emphasis on power relations, intersectionality, and social justice, offers a valuable lens for understanding the complex power dynamics that shape women's lives in Pakistan (Biana, 2020). This research paper delves into the nexus between critical feminism and the determinants of feminism in Pakistan, exploring how intersectionalities of gender, social class, religion, and other social classifications influence women's experiences and struggles (Khan, 2020). Through a critical feminist framework, this study aims to uncover the power dynamics that underpin gender relations in Pakistan, examining how they intersect with other forms of oppression to produce unique experiences of marginalization and social exclusion (Ansari et al., 2023).

Figure 1
Model of Feminist Theory



The model represents the idea of social action to support the oppressive systems in society. The study interrogates the social and political factors contributing to an in-depth understanding of the determinants of feminism in Pakistan, including how critical feminism can inform and transform gender justice struggles in the country (Egbert & Sanden, 2019).

Present Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre

These figures, in their respective roles, demonstrate different facets of the "margin to center" approach, extending beyond Bell Hooks' initial academic theory. Hooks' foundational work is central to critical feminist thought. She redefined feminism as a social movement to end gender oppression by analyzing its intersections with racism, classism, and imperialism, shifting the focus from privileged, white women's experiences toward those of marginalized women (Hooks, 1984; Okpokwasili, 2024). While not a social scientist, Jane Fonda's activism illustrates the evolution of a feminist perspective toward a more intersectional understanding. Her work now explicitly links climate justice with social and economic issues, demonstrating a practical application of the margin-to-center principle (Fonda, 2024). Malala Yousafzai's autobiography exemplifies the "margin to center" principle. By centering her personal story of survival in Pakistan, she amplified global discourse on education and human rights for marginalized girls and founded the Malala Fund to champion girls' education (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013). British

MP Zarah Sultana translates intersectional principles into political advocacy. Her work, including co-founding a new political party, focuses on systemic issues like class inequality, racial injustice, and anti-war advocacy from a perspective rooted in her working-class, minority background (New Left Review, 2025).

Significance of the Study

Gender inequality is a severe and overwhelming social problem in Pakistani society. The present study is significant as it sheds light on deeply embedded patriarchal norms and systematic gender inequalities that affect women's autonomy, vulnerability, intersectionality, and institutional barriers. The critical feminist theory contributes theoretically by expanding feminist discourse beyond Western frameworks. The marginalized voices of women suffering setbacks provide a deep insight into policy reforms and social transformation for the understanding of feminism in Pakistan. It also promotes community-level dialogue to avoid harmful cultural practices in society. This study adapts Critical Feminist Theory to a post-colonial, Islamic, and South Asian context. By doing so, it expands the academic understanding of how "the margin" functions in a society. The findings offer a roadmap for policymakers, NGOs, and activists. By identifying "low autonomy" and "unrecognized domestic labor" as core determinants of marginalization, the study advocates for economic and educational reforms for them. The study moves beyond a monolithic view of "Pakistani women" by specifically identifying how class, disability, and rural geography act as force multipliers for oppression. It sheds light on specific marginalized groups—such as wheelchair-bound women or rural students whose struggles are often ignored by both social media and feminist movements.

Research Questions

1) How does gender intersect with unique experiences of discrimination based on race, class, sexuality, ability, etc.?

2) How is power distributed and exercised, particularly in relation to gender and other forms of oppression?

3) What measures can be taken to bring about transformative change and combat gender-based oppression, thereby promoting social justice in Pakistan?

Review of the Literature

According to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Pakistan has currently faced social issues including religious intolerance, gender-based violence,

extrajudicial killings, and restrictions on freedom of expression (Yousaf et al., 2024). Nussbaum (2016) has focused on the status of women and gender-based violence. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) (2021), over 1000 women were killed in honor-related crimes; the actual number of victims is likely higher due to underreporting (Chughtai, 2018). The Critical Feminism Theory (2019) is considered a model of the present research to overcome intersectionality and marginalization. It provides an overview to understand gendered power dynamics and existing established patriarchal structures (Allen et al., 2022). Nasir (2019) analyzed cultural and identity issues, highlighting gender inequality in Nadeem Aslam's novel Maps for Lost Lovers (Aslam, 2004). The focus of the study in Nadeem Aslam's novel showed resistance to the culture of disrespect for women. The researcher highlights the major aspects of gendered authority and power. Poor-class women are more exploited and used for the benefit of the upper class. The novel showed the alarming status of women in developing countries. Women are not only exploited by people but also in their social relationships. However, the Feminist perspective seeks social equality and social rights for women (Siraj et al., 2021).

Anwer and Chaudhary explored the impact of gender and social class among women living in rural areas. The focus of this research highlights the experiences of rural women in the novel named 'In Beyond the Fields' (2019) who experienced multiple layers of social oppression. The objective of the study is to analyze the various social struggles and self-autonomy demonstrated among rural women in the novel. This study was qualitative research. The research methodology is text-based analysis. The intersectional framework of rural society categorizes social division, including race, gender, class, and disability, which overlaps and shows a significant impact on each other. The hierarchy of power controls multiple axes of oppression, which leads to prejudice and social inequality in rural society (Rauf, 2025). The findings showed blended social oppressions between gender and classes faced by rural women. The novel highlights a deep vision of intersectionality and patriarchy among women in rural society, where gender and social classes play a significant role in developing gender identity (Anwer & Chaudhary, 2024).

Amjad et al. (2023) explore the intersectionality and gender disability among students of the university. This study interprets the differences between boys and girls with disability in Pakistani society. It was a qualitative study. The study was conducted among the undergraduate students of public and private sector universities of Lahore. The respondents were examined through qualitative thematic content analysis. The findings of the research showed that disability tends to affect the social inclusion of individuals with special needs. The nexus between gender disability and marginalized women was more prevalent than in men. Women who lose confidence and low autonomy are affected by their emotional and psychological well-being. The limitation of the study is that very few studies have been conducted on a limited population. Further research could be

conducted on a larger population with a different research methodology. This research raises awareness regarding the social issues faced by girls and women with disabilities.

Soraya, Wijaya, and Panis (2025) explored gender role inequality in marginalized households. The objective of the present study was to identify the division of roles between men and women, intersecting social and economic pressures in family life in the Aqu Ada Community, Kupang. The research methodology was a qualitative phenomenological approach. The data was collected through in-depth interviews with 9 respondents. The data was analyzed through Caroline Moser's gender analysis framework. The findings of the present study revealed that women experienced an extra burden, balancing work outside the home with complete responsibility for domestic work, too. These inequalities were entrenched by strong patriarchal cultural norms, gender disparities, as well as male dominance in household decision-making, which contribute to negative consequences on women's well-being status within marginalized societies.

Research Methodology

The present research adopted the qualitative research method grounded in a critical feminist theoretical framework (Sarantakos, 2012). A qualitative research methodology was adopted to explore lived experiences, power-gendered relations, intersectional identities, and socio-cultural structures existing in Pakistani society. The present study has an interpretivist approach using Critical feminist theory, Intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1991), and Gender Performativity (Butler, 2002) that aims to understand how gendered oppression is constructed, experienced, and justified within Pakistan. It employs qualitative textual analysis to highlight intersectional experiences of women across class, disability, rural-urban divide, and religious contexts (Flick, 2022). The present study uses purposive sampling related to the research questions rather than representativeness, allowing findings to be generalized (Neuman, 2008). Themes have been extracted, including vulnerability, power dynamics, intersectionality, struggle for basic human rights, low autonomy, and male-dominant culture. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis, identifying the intensity of intersectionality and marginalization in women (Grabe, 2020).

Text-Based Statements

- Due to the patriarchal nature of my village, my mother handled my brother and me clearly differently. My brother Omer was always rewarded for success with his favorite 'Milky Kheer,' and I am expected to learn household duties, including 'soft chapatis,' rather than focus on my academics, as taking education is considered a privilege for boys only.

- My Majjo phuppi was afraid to convince my father about my dream to pursue education. Also, Master Saab talked to my mother to allow me to get an education, but she denied.

- My mother was always forced to perform domestic duties only. She never allowed me to roam freely outside the house. However, she believed that it is the right of boys to pursue education (Anwer & Chaudhary, 2024).

- One day, Zara, Tara, and Omer played a game of 'hide and seek'. We played this game outside the house in the fields. While playing, Omer and I were unable to locate Tara. Tara suffered the terrible trauma of being rapped. This incident forced her to commit child marriage. Thus, this innocent game turned into a nightmare.

- Tara was a poor woman in rural Pakistan who was facing patriarchal culture, financial struggles, and illiteracy" (Anwer & Chaudhary, 2024).

- "I wanted to start a vegetable business to help my husband, but he refused me.

- I explained to him that my earnings can help in making dowry for his daughters and also to overcome present financial conditions and other things, but he furiously denied.

- Also, I was not allowed to visit my mother's house anymore" (Ferdoos, 2025).

- I became a target of gender violence and torture, suffering from insanity during the conflict in Afghanistan.

- Taliban killed me.

- After that, I was on the floor, a man turned up the burka and dragged me away. Silently, blood started to drip out of my embroidered eye grille" (Nasir, 2019).

- "While I was heading towards my relative's home, I was kidnapped on 4th January, 2018, from Pakistan.

- After a few days had passed, my damaged body was found in a garbage bin.

- The postmortem report confirmed that I was raped and choked to demise" (Chughtai, 2018).

- "To be honest, I was not happy with 'Teaching' as a Career because I wanted to be a fighter pilot. However, due to certain socio-cultural and intersectional influences, I had to give up my dream.
- My parents never supported me.
- Thus, I had to compromise and switch towards academics due to the lack of male family members" (Abbasi, 2023).

- Girls of the school and Care Home state that Boys blow whistles at us, taking pictures, and then try to Harass and blackmail. We are at risk of it; the Care takers ignored our issue. We are not comfortable sharing our problems with them. They do not bother understanding our emotional state; they only care about society.
- The parents are worried when their daughters go out because of the negative attitude towards girls, whether attending school or being outside, which is surrounded in the socio-cultural setting of Skardu" (Shah et al., 2025)

- "When I was 7 years old, I became wheelchair-bound. It was very hard for me to accept this reality. My parents helped me accept the truth gradually.
- For education, I went to a special school; therefore, I faced difficulty in adjusting to the environment of college and university. However, my classmates never include me in their plans outside the school, as I am physically impaired, but I never felt isolated in college and university.
- I faced many troubles in marriage" (Amjad et al., 2023).

Thematic Map

The composition of the cluster of themes and emergent themes is derived from formulated meanings:

Cluster of Themes	Emergent Themes
Vulnerability	i) Women and girls are more vulnerable and treated as subjects of power. ii) The social lives of females create isolation and marginalization, affecting them physically, socially, and emotionally.

Power Dynamics	i) Most women in rural areas lived within the limitations of patriarchal culture, financial struggles, and no access to resources, such as education and other necessities. ii) Women's empowerment suffers due to patriarchal norms and oppression in rural society.
Intersectionality	i) Poor class women and people are more exploited, facing prejudice and social inequality. ii) Misinterpretation of religious teaching creates marginalized communities. iii) Lack of education and vocational skills leads to feminine oppression.
Struggle For Basic Human Rights	i) Struggle for securing fundamental rights like education, healthcare, and political participation. ii) Due to unequal gender roles, if a woman wishes to do anything besides sitting at home and raising kids, she must get permission from 'a man' (father, brother, or husband).
Low Autonomy	i) In Pakistani society, women are overburdened with unrecognized work such as household chores. ii) Due to the patriarchal social structure, women are left with low autonomy in our society.
Male Dominant Culture	i) In Pakistan, intersectionality leads to a male-dominant culture, race, education, caste, and biradari system. ii) In Pakistani culture, religious stereotypes promote male dominance since childhood. This social behavior was ultimately used as a tool to instill fear in their female children.

Discussion

This research paper examines the intersectionalities and power dynamics in Pakistan. This research explores Pakistani feminism, which doesn't practice the real narrative of feminism in Pakistan (Qayum et al., 2025). The Global Gender Gap Index ranks

Pakistan 145th out of 146th countries. This gains the attention of social scientists and researchers to fulfill the gap of gender inequality and limited understanding of feminism among the citizens of Pakistan (World Economic Forum, 2022). Also, Pakistan remained a patriarchal society where it is believed that women should always carry out their domestic work only and are not allowed to support themselves and other family members financially. This woman's dependent behavior offers more power and autonomy to men. However, Pakistan ranks 161 out of 191countries on the Gender Inequality Index (United Nations Women, 2023). Moreover, the current challenges faced in protecting women's rights are due to the inadequate practice of laws and women's rights. Pakistan has enacted laws to protect women's basic rights and prevent gender based violence. Article 25 guarantees equality between men and women (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2015). Women are unable to access justice and legal recourse due to gender bias in society. Pakistan ranks 129th out of 140 countries in the world in the 2022 Rule of Law Index. In violent cases, many women drop out before a conclusion is reached, and even those who persevere until the end are unable to obtain justice due to the low conviction rate, i.e., approximately 2% (United Nations Women, 2023). The findings revealed that women were less educated, mainly dependent on lower-income structures within their families. This dependency creates weak self-autonomy and decision-making to achieve their goals. Women face stereotypes and stigma based on gender, limiting their opportunities, resulting in gender inequality (Khan et al., 1994).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the nexus between Critical Feminist Theory and the determinants of feminism in Pakistan reveals a landscape where gender-based oppression is not a singular experience, but a sophisticated web of intersecting vulnerabilities. This study underscores that for Pakistani women, discrimination is rarely the result of gender alone; rather, it is the compounding effect of class disparity, rural-urban divides, misinterpreted religious frameworks, and physical ability that dictates their level of autonomy and safety (Fraser, 2013). The struggle for gender equality in Pakistan is deeply entrenched in power dynamics and intersectionality. Patriarchal norms and structures perpetuate gender-based oppression, which is further worsened by intersecting factors like class, race, ethnicity, religion, and ability. Feminist movements in Pakistan must acknowledge and address these power imbalances and intersectionalities (Saigol, 2006). This requires amplifying voices and experiences for marginalized women, challenging dominant narratives and structures, and advocating for policies and laws that protect and empower all women (The Friday Times, 2024).

The research confirms that while Pakistan possesses a constitutional and Islamic legal framework intended to protect women, these protections are often neutralized by deep-

seated patriarchal power dynamics. The "margin to center" analysis demonstrates that the most marginalized voices—such as those of disabled women in universities or survivors of violence in rural areas—are frequently omitted from mainstream feminist discourse. Furthermore, the study highlights a significant disconnect between urban feminist slogans and the structural needs of the broader population, who struggle for fundamental rights like education, inheritance, and freedom from domestic surveillance. By recognizing and dismantling the complex web of power dynamics and intersectionalities, we can build a more equitable Pakistan, where all citizens can grow to their full potential, regardless of gender, class, race, or ability (Iqbal et al., 2023). The aspect of Aurat March feminism, like 'mera jism meri marzi', 'Chadar aur Chardewari', 'Khana khud garam karo', does not portray the exact picture of feminism in Pakistan at all. They are just misleading slogans (Batool & Anees, 2021). Actually, the Pakistani women are fighting and struggling for the enactment of laws because, despite existing laws, women do not have legal support due to male dominance, and they are suppressing the rights of women due to intersectionality and marginalization (Abdellatif, 2021).

Ultimately, the struggle for gender justice in Pakistan requires more than just legal enactment; it demands a dismantling of the patriarchal monopoly over social and economic resources. True transformation will only occur when intersectionality is at the heart of policy-making, ensuring that the movement for equality includes women of all socio-economic backgrounds and abilities. By challenging dominant narratives and fostering community-level dialogue that involves both men and women, Pakistan can move toward a more equitable society where gender no longer serves as a determinant of one's human rights or potential. Through education, awareness, and community engagement, we can promote feminist values and challenge patriarchal norms (Wijeyesinghe, 2019). By involving men in feminist conversations and initiatives, we can challenge toxic masculinity and promote marginalized women. Policy reforms, grassroots activism, and collaborations with organizations, academia, and government entities can help in creating a more equitable society (Choudry, 2023).

Recommendations

- Women and girls should be educated and given priority to make choices on their own. This study suggests that it is essential to educate the entire community on gender equality.
- Male counseling is limited. Steps should be taken by psychologists, therapists, and counselors.

- The change of the mindset of the tribal male is the dire need of the era. Furthermore, a change in the mindset of women of the tribal areas is also needed to protect their basic rights firmly.
- Islamic teachings protect women's rights, but these are overlooked due to myths of insane masculinity and the giving up of women's rights that is transferred by their culture.
- Additionally, funders, politicians, researchers, and activists must collaborate to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated for developing strategies that promote more equitable masculinities and femininities, as well as to implement effective approaches to tackle the interconnected issues of male dominance, gender inequality, and violence against women, among other members of society.
- Moreover, the women's representation in the government policy-making and law-making seems to be the solution of intersectional feminism in Pakistani society.

Limitations

- Laws are available, but the implementations of these laws are limited.
- Further research should be pursued in this area, with researchers engaging more individuals to gain a deeper understanding of male dominance and women's perspectives, which would help to raise awareness and subsequently empower women in society.

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