

Strategic Engagements: Analyzing the Relationships of Indian and Pakistani Women's Movements to Islam

Nida Kirmani

Summary

Both the Indian and Pakistani women's movements have had a contentious relationship with Islam, particularly since the 1980s. In India the Shah Bano case brought the issue of Muslim women's rights to the center of national attention and led women's groups to an impasse on the question of their own representation. Since this time, several NGOs and networks have emerged across the country that advocate for Muslim women's rights using both religiously informed and human rights-based approaches. In the Pakistani context, the women's movement was consolidated in response to Zia ul-Haq's "Islamization" program, which led to a serious regression in women's rights. The women's movement at this time confronted the conservative *ulema* by arguing for progressive interpretations of Islam as well as by utilizing the language of human rights. Women's rights activists in Pakistan have since had a varying relationship with religion, depending on the issue at hand. This paper compares the trajectories in recent decades of both movements in relation to Islam, exploring the debates that have taken place amongst women's rights activists in both contexts. A comparison of the trajectories of both movements in relation to Islam (one in a Muslim-minority country, one in a Muslim-majority country) will provide a unique perspective and shed light on the impact of political and social contexts on the constraints and strategies of women's movements vis-à-vis religion.

Manuscript received on 2012-09-17, accepted on 2012-11-01

Keywords: women's movements, India, Pakistan, Muslim women's rights

Introduction

Calls for gender equality and women's rights frequently challenge religious traditions and precepts, forcing many women's movements across the world to confront conservative religious groups. South Asian women's movements are no exception: both the Indian and Pakistani women's movements¹ have frequently had

1 Like all social movements, both the Indian and Pakistani women's movements are fluid, fragmented and dynamic. The terms "women's movement" and "feminism" are themselves contested in both contexts (Butalia 2002; Sumar 2002). As is the case in many postcolonial contexts, there are several women's rights activists in India and Pakistan who reject the label "feminist" altogether because of its supposed Western bias (Kishwar 1990). Questions have been raised in both India and Pakistan as to whether a "women's movement" actually exists. "Women's movement" is used loosely in this