

ROLE OF WOMEN AS COMMUNITY MEDIATORS IN URBAN PUNJAB: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF GRASSROOT LEVEL CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACEBUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding has received increasing scholarly attention; however, their contributions at the community level often remained informal and underrecognized in academic research. This research aims to explore the role of women as grassroots level mediators in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in urban areas of Punjab, Pakistan. An exploratory cross sectional research design was adopted, and data/information were collected through Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) conducted in urban areas of the Punjab (Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan |) with women actively involved in community-level mediation practices for conflict resolution. The findings indicated that women play a significant role in resolving conflicts through dialogue facilitation, early intervention, and trust-based leadership within their communities. Women mediators were found to address a range of disputes, including family disagreements, neighbourhood tensions, minority harassment cases, and identity-based conflicts related to caste, religion, and political affiliation. It was revealed that their mediation practices primarily involved organizing informal discussions between conflicting parties to promote communication and reach mutually acceptable solutions. This study also highlighted women's preventive role in addressing tensions at an early stage, thereby reducing the likelihood of escalation into violence. Furthermore, the findings suggested that women's effectiveness as mediators is closely linked to the social trust and recognition they have developed within their communities. Despite their contributions to maintaining social harmony, women's roles in conflict resolution remained largely informal and underrepresented within institutional peacebuilding frameworks.

Keywords: Women mediators, grassroots level peacebuilding, conflict resolution, urban Punjab, community mediation, informal peace practices

INTRODUCTION

The conceptualization of peacebuilding and conflict resolution has been traditional in the sense that it is a formal process being conducted by the institutional frameworks of the courts, the law enforcement agencies, and the state led negotiations. But over the past few years, this has been changing as the scholarly focus on studying informal and community-based interventions to deal with the everyday conflicts, and help lead to social harmony in the long term, has begun to increase (Mac Ginty, 2014). The concept of

women as non-institutionalized grassroots actors mediating conflicts has in this regard become a crucial but under-researched aspect of peacebuilding, especially in developing nations where institutional backing is usually frail or inaccessible (O'Reilly, O Suilleabhain, & Paffenholz, 2015).

Internationally, the significance of women in the peace processes has been associated with more sustainable and inclusive results. Research shows that if women are part of peace dealings, there

are higher chances of the dealings to last and tackle the issues that lead the conflict by considering the welfare of the people like education, healthcare, and social justice (UN Women, 2020). Although such an understanding has grown, the number of women who have been involved in the formal version of peace talks is still very small, especially in South Asian cultures where the culture of patriarchy still limits the role of women in making decisions at the level of the population (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019). The latter has led to the fact that the role of women in peacebuilding will often be informal at the community level and not through institutional means.

The conflict resolution dynamics in Pakistan are well rooted in the socio-cultural and gendered power relations that define the access to power and engagement in the life of the common place. The customary systems like Panchayat and elders dominate in the process of dispute resolution and women are mostly left out because of the inherent gender norms (Zakar, Zakar, and Kramer, 2012). However, women often apply mediation in social circles that they live in by acting as interlocutors, mediating interpersonal conflicts, and avoiding the emergence of violence between people. Such peace practices in everyday life can be seen as the example of what Mac Ginty (2014) referred to as the local peacebuilding: in this case, the community members play an active role in keeping the society stable by informally interacting and negotiating.

Punjab cities like Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan are the special places to analyze the role played by women in resolving of conflicts because of their demographic mix, social strata and growing civic activity. In contrast to the situation in rural settings where established traditional power is a stronger force, urban environments allow women to engage in community activities, local groups and civil society projects to facilitate dialogue and social unity (Haroon, 2023). Women in these situations tend to mediate in the conflict situations pertaining to family, neighbourhood, political and identity related conflicts like caste differences or religious differences.

The informal mediation activities that were conducted by women from great importance

since they include the micro-level conflicts, which might ultimately develop into wider tensions within the community. Studies indicate that female participants are more likely to be dialogue-focused and more predisposed to using empathy-based, negotiation-based, and consensus-building approaches instead of adversarial approaches that are linked to formal legal systems (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Women mediators have help to prevent violence and heal divided communities by intervening at the preliminary phases of a conflict. The everyday peacebuilding concept is consistent with such practices, as it emphasizes the aggregate effect of daily social interactions in serving the maintenance of peaceful coexistence (Mac Ginty, 2014).

Nevertheless, there was scanty empirical literature concerning the role of women in urban peacebuilding in Pakistan, although there is evidence indicating their involvement in this field. The literature on the subject has mainly discussed women as targets of a conflict or as recipients of a post-conflict rehabilitation initiative as opposed to being the participants of conflict resolution efforts (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019). The gap is especially noticeable in urban Punjab where the informal mediation work of women in the neighbourhoods and community organisations is not often recorded in the academic studies and policy frameworks.

This gap was necessary to adopt gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding to acknowledge and encourage women at the grassroots level. The role of women in conflict resolution in the urban centers can be very helpful in making relevant the other processes of peacebuilding that do not rely on the formal institutions. In addition, the recording of such practices may be used to guide the policy efforts to enhance the local capacities of preventing conflicts and promoting social cohesion.

Consequently, this research paper addressed the issues of the nature and the level of women involvement in community-based conflict resolutions in the urban regions of Punjab Pakistan. A study was carried out by using qualitative techniques to observe the experiences and perceptions of women who mediate in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan to explain the importance of informal mediation practices in maintaining peace within the neighbourhood.

Through this, the research is part of the overall discussion of the grassroots level peacebuilding by underscoring the role of women as active participants in ensuring the social harmony in the urban communities.

Literature Review

The subject of women in peacebuilding has been receiving growing scholarly and policy interest in the last 20 years, especially since the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) formally acknowledged the role of women in the prevention of conflicts, resolution of conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction (United Nations, 2000). The resolution underlined the necessity of women having equal participation in all peace and security activities and the need to incorporate the gender perspectives in peace processes. It was a big change in how women were viewed as mere victims of conflict to those who are agents of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Thereafter, the research has shown that the presence of women in peace processes leads to sustainable and more inclusive peace processes. The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda highlights that women's active involvement in the decision-making process will increase the efficiency of the conflict resolution strategies and will lead to long-term social stability (UN Women, 2020). Women have in most instances contributed significantly to the occurrence of bridging communication failures between warring groups by facilitating communication and establishing trust at the community levels (Gbadeyan, 2024).

In spite of these international undertakings, structural challenges against their involvement in formal peace talks and institutional conflict resolution processes persist in being experienced by women. The studies show that though the participation of women in the peace processes has become more symbolic, their impact on the final decisions has been relatively low since gender inequalities and social and cultural standards have not disappeared (Peace Agency, 2026). Such obstacles are especially visible in the developing world where patriarchal systems tend to limit the opportunities of women to hold leadership positions and access to the government and its public sphere.

Women participation in decision making processes in the society is heavily influenced by traditional gender norms and social hierarchies in the South Asian societies and Pakistan is not an exception. The involvement of women in resolving conflicts is often limited to informal areas like homes, communities, and neighbourhoods where they practise mediation in the process of solving interpersonal conflicts and averting the escalation of tensions (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019). These informal mediation activities form what scholars refer to as grassroots peacebuilding which entails daily social interactions that lead to preservation of social harmony within communities.

The availability of different social structures and the presence of more avenues of education, employment and civic participation opportunities in the urban environments offered distinctive chances to explore the role of women in the peacebuilding process in urban settings. Research in Global South nations implies that women, who live in an urban environment, will tend to join community organisations and local governance that encourage the conflict resolution methods based on dialogue (Yahya, 2022). The environments allow women to serve as mediators of conflicts concerning family conflicts, political conflicts and conflicts involving identities and hence help in the prevention of violence at micro level.

Nevertheless, due to the informality of the women mediation practices, women mediation practices tend to be disregarded by both formal policy frameworks and academia. The available literature regarding the concept of peacebuilding in Pakistan has been more inclined on interventions or peacekeeping efforts of the state or international powers, whilst not much has been done to understand community-level efforts implemented by women in urban areas. This gap brings to focus the requirement of the use of empirical research to determine the impact of everyday peace practices of women in conflict resolution mechanisms in urban society. The role of women as grass root mediators is necessary in understanding gender sensitive peace building strategies that can recognize and encourage the informal conflict resolution systems. This research aims at making a contribution to the wider discussion on inclusive peacebuilding and offer evidence about

alternative measures to prevent conflicts by capturing the lived experience of women involved in mediation in the urban Punjab.

Methodology

This research paper was based on a cross sectional (exploratory) research design as the study aimed at examining the role of women in the community level conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Punjab (urban areas) in Pakistan. The qualitative approach was deemed to be suitable because it would enable one to develop the in-depth knowledge of the experiences, perceptions and practices of the participants in the resolution of their daily conflicts in their respective communities. However, in contrast to quantitative approaches, where the measurement involves quantifiable variables, qualitative inquiry pays attention to contextual definitions and social interactions that determine conflict resolution practices at the grassroots level (Creswell, 2014).

The sample used in the study consisted of three large urban centres in Punjab, Lahore, Rawalpindi as well as Multan. These cities were chosen as the central, northern and southern areas of the province, respectively. Urban environments were selected because they had a variety of people, multi-layered social life, and more avenues of civic participation, which can affect women in the peacebuilding efforts at a community level.

The study involved women of 18 years and above who were committed in community level mediation processes or peacebuilding in the respective neighbourhoods or social networks. The identification of the participants who had relevant experience in conflict resolution practices has been taken through the use of a purposive sampling technique. Qualitative research tends to utilize purposive sampling to identify information rich cases enabling the researcher to make any meaningful insight into the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). The data/information, in this case, was gathered using Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) which is recognized to be a powerful method of qualitative research in terms of exploring common experiences and perceptions of social problems held by a group. FGIs allow interacting participants to reflect and expound their experiences in a social setting (Krueger & Casey,

2015). Seven FGIs were carried out in the chosen cities of which three were in the city of Lahore, two in the city of Rawalpindi and two in the city of Multan. Groups were between six and twelve members, which is in line with the advised group size in order to produce a variety of discussions but manageable.

The FGI protocol has been developed according to Patton 2015 and considering the study objectives to guarantee the consistency of research questions and data collection. Questioning route involved the participants in the activities of mediation of conflicts, the nature of conflicts that were managed, conflict strategies that were used to resolve the conflicts and how they perceived the end results of their engagement in peacebuilding. The entire FGIs were held in neutral and convenient places to guarantee comfort and confidentiality of the participants. Informed consent was signed by all the respondents before taking the part and ethical aspects, like anonymity and voluntary participation were highly respected.

The discussions have been audio-recorded with the consent of the participants in order to record the responses accurately. The tapes were then transcribed word-to-word to maintain the originality in the stories of the participants. The thematic analysis method was applied to the data/information obtained in accordance with the six-phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006). Such method of analysis is done through becoming acquainted with the data/information, creating codes first, discovering common themes, re-examination of these themes, and drawing conclusions.

The selection of the thematic analysis was driven by the fact that it allowed the systematic process of identifying patterns in the qualitative perspective and the interpretation of the experiences of participants with regard to the research objectives (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Based on this process, the major themes associated with women mediation practices, conflict prevention strategy, and how women contributed to the maintenance of peace in the community were identified and interpreted in order to offer insights to the role of women in solving conflicts at the grassroots level and urban Punjab in peace building.

Result and Discussion

The qualitative data/information were employed by using Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) which were later portrayed through qualitative interviews that showed that women in urban centers of Punjab were engaging in resolving community level disputes by informal mediation practices integrated in the daily social life practices. The respondents spoke about the tasks they complete in resolving an extensive variety of conflicts, such as family disputes, neighbourhood conflicts, minority harassment situations, youth conflicts, political conflicts, and identity-related disagreements, such as caste and religion conflicts. In spite of the fact that the nature of conflicts in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan was different, a number of similar patterns were found in how women were involved in the process of conflict resolution and peacebuilding on the community level.

In most of the cases, women mediation was informally acknowledged but arose naturally as a result of their social status as mothers, elders, teachers, or members of their communities. The participants indicated that the level of familiarity with the local dynamics and interpersonal relationships allowed them to intervene in conflicts in a manner that was seen to be less confrontational than official authorities like police or legal representatives. Consequently, women had the tendency to play the go-between roles between opposing sides to reopen the communication lines and ensure peaceful solutions. A brief report on participants reflection of various aspect, this entire process of conflict resolution and peacebuilding can be described in the following way:

Dialogue Based Conflict Resolution

In all the focus groups that took place in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan, the participants stressed the dialogue facilitation as the most basic tool that is used to address the conflict in their society. The women claimed that they usually started by organizing informal gatherings where conflicting sides met and this was supposed to facilitate communication and understanding between them.

The participants commented that dialogue-based interventions especially worked in solving interpersonal conflicts which included families conflict, conflict based on inter-caste marriages,

and neighbourhood conflict based on religious or social practices. In Lahore, women were found to mediate between families after they had disagreements over the marriage arrangements whereas in Multan, elder women were known to intervene in conflicts of inheritance claim and the division of property.

One of the participants in FGI in Lahore said:

"Most of the time we call them both sides and persuade them to come to the negotiation table so that the issue can be solved amicably before it gets out of hand."

These informal sittings gave the two parties a no fear area where they could bring out their issues without having to face each other or resulting in a fight. Respondents also cited that they could easily divide the parties into two when dealing with a dispute and then arrange discussions jointly to come up with mutually agreeable solutions. This is what contributed to a decrease in hostility and to cooperation among the members of the community.

Prevention of Conflict Escalation

The other key theme that was coming out of the data/information in the course of discussion was the part women are playing in ensuring that conflicts do not develop into more serious conflicts. The participants always noted that they acted at the initial tension phases to prevent physical fights or permanent enmity between the members of the community.

Among the strategies that were implemented in early intervention was organizing community meetings, involvement of the respected elders and between the conflicting parties, discussions were made before the situation escalated. In Rawalpindi, women, on their part, said they had mediated on conflicts that had arisen as a result of misinformation that was generated on social media platforms and caused conflicts between families in the same region.

One of the participants of Rawalpindi explained this preventative strategy in the following way:

"Should we start at the very onset, and make people sit down together, the probability of a fight will be very minimal."

On the same note, the interviewees in Multan explained how they used to hold neighbourhood meetings to discuss issues regarding drug selling by youths. Such interventions tended to ensure that any conflict does not develop into a violent

conflict or extended conflict that might affect the relationships within the communities.

Community Level Leadership and Trust

Those who participated in all three cities pointed out that their capacity to resolve conflict situations was highly reliant on the trust that they had built amongst their communities with time. Social roles, experience, and reputation were cited by women as aspects that helped them to infiltrate delicate conflicts that otherwise would have gone without resolutions.

In most instances, community members resorted to the services of women mediators because they were considered to be neutral and understanding of settlement of conflicts. Respondents revealed that their participation was usually received favorably since they were perceived to be less dictatorial and more compassionate than official organizations.

One of the Multan participants emphasized the meaning of community trust saying:

"People listen to us because they are aware of the fact that we are attempting to resolve the problem without taking sides."

Social trust increased the efficiency of mediation work done by women as they could also hold meetings and suggest systems that will be accepted by the conflicting parties without any opposition. In other cases, the members have mentioned that they were invited by other community-based groups to facilitate conflict resolutions because of their reputation of being fair.

Management of Identity Based Conflicts

The results further showed that the mediation practices of women were not only limited to the interpersonal conflicts but also on identity based conflicts related to religion, caste, and political affiliation. The respondents stated that they have solved cases of minority harassment, inter-caste marriage conflict, and religious practices through the help of dialogue-based intervention. In Rawalpindi, minimum, women held community meetings in order to resolve tensions between religious minorities family and their neighbours. Likewise, in Lahore, the mediation was targeted to bring together families that were against inter-caste marriages. In Multan, respondents explained how they intervened in arguments about the use of mosque

loudspeakers that had made divisions within neighbourhoods.

One of the participants in Rawalpindi told her experience of arbitrating a dispute at the community level in the following way:

"We organized an assembly between the two groups in order to ensure that the matter did not tear apart the neighbourhood."

These interventions are indicative of the fact that the role of women in conflict resolution cuts across a broad spectrum of community related issues that can easily interfere with social cohesion when not addressed. Their mediating activities helped in creating peaceful coexistence among the urban societies as they promoted dialogue and respect to conflicting parties.

Overview of Discussion and Conclusion

This research showed that women in urban Punjab actively contribute to the level of conflict resolution in the community through the informal mediation practice that is incorporated in the daily social life of the community. These results are not unique as the current literature indicates that the involvement of women in the peacebuilding process frequently exists beyond the institutional framework and is based on the localized social networks instead of being facilitated by the state (Mac Ginty, 2014). The focus of dialogue-based mediation, as an emblem of the participants, is a collaborative conflict resolution model based on dialogues, empathy, and consensus-building rather than adversarial conflict resolution strategies that generally belong to formal legal systems.

The main conflict resolution strategy based on dialogue use was in line with other scholars who have noted the propensity among women to use negotiation and relationship-based methods in mediation (O'Reilly, O Suilleabhain, and Paffenholz, 2015). Women mediators help to change the possible hostile relations between the conflicting sides to co-operative relations by informally facilitating discussions between the parties, thus, ensuring social cohesion within their communities. These are all signs of grassroots peacebuilding and operation at the micro level which will eliminate the root causes of the daily conflicts and before they turn violent.

The other notable observation of the research was the role played by the women in the early

intervention in ensuring that conflicts do not escalate. Participants identified themselves to intervene at the early tension levels with the use of informal meetings and dialogues at the community level that minimized the chances of occurrence of tension into physical confrontations and long-term hostility. This preventive quality aligns with everyday peacebuilding as it focuses on the cumulative effect of the daily social activities to keep the coexistence of peace in the conflict-prone settings (Mac Ginty, 2014). Women mediators can reduce the chances of escalation of conflicts and promote collaboration between members of the community, by resolving conflicts at the initial stages.

Moreover, the results implied that the role of women during mediation procedures is strongly related to the degree of social trust and awareness they have in their groups. The participants mentioned that their reputation and social status created an easy way to accept their mediation activities even in cases of very sensitive disagreements regarding family or identity issues. This point contributes to the argument that the power that women follow in the context of peacebuilding is frequently based on relational power and not institutional authority (O'Reilly et al., 2015). The trust built in the community relationships helps women to intervene successfully in the conflict situations in urban settings where formal mechanisms might be seen as being closed, time-consuming or biased.

The fact that women were involved in arbitrating interreligious religious, caste, and political affiliation identity-based conflicts further elaborated to the wider role in the peacebuilding exercise. These results indicate that the implementation of mediation by women goes beyond interpersonal conflict to include those issues that can hurt the interpersonal harmony in society. Past studies have also reported that the issue of women involvement in the processes of peace will be able to target the structural and relational aspect of conflict given that women involvement will facilitate the inclusive dialogue and reconciliation (True and Riveros-Morales, 2019).

Irrespective of their work, the informality of the mediation practiced by women usually results in their being marginalized in the official policy

agenda as well as in scholarly literature. Some of the current interventions of peacebuilding in Pakistan have been more or less centered on the interventions of the state and the institutionalized mechanisms yet the very little attention has been on those interventions of the community that are undertaken by women in the urban other centers. Such an institutional gap can limit the sustainability of the grassroots peacebuilding activities in the long term because it prevents access to resources, training, and formal acknowledgement.

The research paper hence added to the existing body of literature that asserts the importance of acknowledging and assisting informal actors in the conflict resolution processes. Recognizing the role of women participation in the grassroots in larger peacebuilding programs can be used to supplement the formal dispute resolution practices as well as bolster the success of local peacebuilding practices. This study sheds light on the need of gender sensitized approaches that revere the roles of community based actors in enhancing sustainable peace by documenting informal mediation practices by women in urban Punjab.

Conclusion

This scholarly article reviewed the role of women in resolving conflicts and peace building at the community level in the urban communities in Punjab, Pakistan. The results showed that women were actively practising informal mediation processes that help them uphold social peace in their societies. The women mediators resolved many different conflicts, such as family conflicts, neighbourhood conflicts, conflicts based on identity and conflicts based on community, through dialogue facilitation, early intervention and trust-based leadership.

Contrary to the formal institutional mechanisms, which usually depended on law and bureaucracy, the social relation and the daily interactions carry the mediation practice of women. Women mediators facilitated the understanding between conflicting parties by mediating them and playing a constructive role in order to stop the development of issues into violence. The fact that they are involved in conflict resolution processes shows the

importance of the grassroots peacebuilding that exists outside formal systems of governance.

The results also indicated that the success of women as mediators is strongly related to the trust and social identity that they have established in their societies. This type of relational power helps them to mediate tense conflicts and provide solutions that can be agreeable to all parties. In urban areas, where there might be little or no access to formal authority or conflict solving mechanisms, these types of informal mediation techniques are crucial in maintaining peace at the neighbourhood level.

Although women made these contributions, their efforts in conflict resolution were not taken seriously and their efforts in resolving conflicts were not widely acknowledged within institutional peacebuilding models. Lack of systematic support and gender sensitive approaches to peacebuilding may hamper the sustainability of women mediation in the long term. Thus, it is important to realize and capitalize on the role of women on the grassroots level in mitigating and incorporating them into more comprehensive peacebuilding efforts in the urban population.

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