

Transnational Struggles: Gender, Sexuality, and Social Justice in Pakistan and the Asian Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary gender and sexuality politics in Pakistan are shaped by a confluence of local histories, religious discourses, structural inequalities, and widespread transnational flows of labour, knowledge, and digital communication. This article critically examines these intersecting dynamics by situating Pakistan within broader South and Southeast Asian migratory networks, with a particular emphasis on the lived experiences of women, queer individuals, and transgender communities, both within Pakistan and throughout the Asian diaspora. Utilising feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial studies, and migration studies, the article asserts that gendered and sexual struggles in Pakistan are fundamentally transnational, reflecting the global circulation of norms, activism, and resistance.

Digital activism, labour migration, diasporic feminist networks, and international human rights frameworks all play significant roles in shaping evolving expressions of agency, identity, and contestation. Through an interdisciplinary review of literature and case studies—including the Aurat March, legal reforms for transgender persons, and the experiences of Pakistani migrant workers in Gulf and Asian cities—the article advocates for a transnational social justice approach grounded in intersectionality, cultural specificity, and international rightsbased collaboration. It concludes that genuine transformation requires addressing structural inequalities at both national and transnational levels, amplifying migrant and queer voices, and resisting the rise of authoritarian and Islamophobic tendencies within the global landscape.

Keywords: Pakistan; Gender; Sexuality; migration; Asian diaspora; Khwaja sira; Social justice 1.

INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, gender and sexuality politics have traditionally been rooted in national narratives emphasising Islamic identity, colonial legal histories, and entrenched patriarchal kinship systems. Nevertheless, Pakistan is inherently transnational, influenced by one of the largest migrant worker communities and extensive diasporic networks across Asia, the Gulf, Europe, and North America. As a result, gender and sexual identities—along with associated justice movements—are not confined by national borders. They are perpetually shaped and reshaped through global mobility, digital media, international rights discourses, and cultural exchanges (Kandiyoti 2019; Weiss 2019).

Millions of Pakistanis live and work abroad, mainly in the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong. These migration patterns substantially shape gender roles, masculinities, femininities, and queer identities, while also exposing migrants to new forms of surveillance, insecurity, and opportunities (Ali 2018; Gardner 2010). Women's rights movements in Pakistan—such as the Aurat March—leverage transnational feminist networks, international human rights frameworks, and digital activism on a global scale (Amnesty International, 2020; Jamal, 2020). At the same time, efforts to support transgender people and khwaja siras align with international LGBT movements, religious reinterpretations, and policy development worldwide (Rehan 2016; Hossain 2020).

Concurrently, Pakistan is experiencing a rise in conservative backlash, often influenced by transnational Islamist movements, international right-wing networks, and Islamophobic discourses within Western contexts (Mahmood, 2005; Puar, 2007; Shakhsari, 2020). These opposing trends illustrate that the politics of gender and sexuality in Pakistan are interconnected with global systems of power and mobility. Analysing gender and sexuality solely within Pakistan's national borders is inadequate, as the forces shaping identity, repression, and resistance are inherently transnational. Migration, diasporic political networks, online platforms, and global religious discourses all influence gendered and sexual identities in ways that transcend local cultural narratives (Weiss, 2019, p. 4). Consequently, gender and queer struggles in Pakistan should be regarded not merely as cultural issues but as outcomes of interconnected global structures, including labour systems, Islamophobic narratives, and worldwide religious ideologies (Puar, 2007, p. 28). Adopting a transnational perspective facilitates a clearer understanding of how Pakistani women, queer individuals, and migrants experience and challenge power.

This article examines how gender and sexuality struggles in Pakistan intersect across borders, underscoring the necessity for an intersectional, transnational, and justice-focused framework. It seeks to address four principal questions:

1. How do transnational migration and diaspora networks shape the gendered and sexual identities of Pakistanis?
2. In what ways do feminist, queer, and transgender movements in Pakistan link with global activism?
3. In what ways do state structures, religious discourses, and global inequalities influence social justice outcomes?

This article addresses these questions by drawing upon interdisciplinary literature, case studies, and theories from feminist, queer, and migration scholarship. It begins with the historical and theoretical foundations of gender and sexuality in Pakistan, reviews relevant research, and analyses transnational case studies prior to presenting a comprehensive framework for transnational justice.

Taken together, these research questions delineate a study that advances beyond cultural explanations towards a structural comprehension of gender and sexuality within Pakistan. By situating these issues within transnational flows, the introduction elucidates how global labour markets, migration systems, and digital networks influence the lived experiences of Pakistani communities (Weiss 2019, 4). This foundation emphasises the importance of investigating gender and sexuality across borders, where processes of identity formation and political activism occur amidst the intersection of global and local forces (Puar 2007, 32).

2. Historical Background: Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Pakistan

Prior to the onset of colonial governance, gender and sexuality in South Asia functioned within fluid and pluralistic cultural and religious frameworks that acknowledged multiple gender identities and expressions. In Mughal courts and precolonial societies, khwaja siras served as custodians of harems, spiritual intermediaries, and influential political actors—roles rooted in Islamic, Sufi, and Indo-Persian traditions of gendered personhood that blurred binary distinctions (Nanda 1999, 44; Hossain 2020, 8). These identities were intricately embedded in complex ethical realms where gender variance was not simply tolerated but held institutional and ritual importance. Sexuality, accordingly, was governed by diverse moral architectures rooted in Sufi metaphysics, poetic traditions, and localised concepts of desire, modesty, and honour. These precolonial configurations demonstrate that gender and sexuality in South Asia historically operated within diverse cultural grammars rather than strict binaries. Recognising this indigenous diversity challenges contemporary assertions that gender plurality is a foreign or Western construct, instead revealing that nonbinary and nonheteronormative subjectivities possess deep historical roots within the region's social and religious narratives.

British colonialism fundamentally transformed indigenous gender and sexual systems by enforcing Victorian morals via legal and administrative measures. The Indian Penal Code's Section 377 established a strict divide between "natural" and "unnatural" sexual acts, criminalising same-sex relations and portraying gender variance as criminal and deviant (Gupta 2006, 4815). Colonial authorities also placed khwaja siras under the Criminal Tribes Act, subjecting them to surveillance, registration, and public shame (Hossain 2020, 14). These actions were not just moral laws—they served as governance tools that reshaped South Asian identities, privatised sexuality, and used heteronormativity as a means of imperial control. Scholars contend that these colonial legal systems introduced new hierarchies of respectability, gender norms, and bodily discipline that still influence South Asian societies. By criminalising local gender expressions and framing sexuality within racialised norms of civility, the colonial state inflicted epistemic violence, with lasting impacts on legal and social structures today.

After gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan's ruling elites selectively adopted and reinterpreted colonial gender norms, embedding them into national identity efforts and Islamic constitutional frameworks. While early governments aimed for modernization, later regimes—particularly under General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988)—shifted gender and sexuality policies through Islamization, increasing state control over women's mobility, sexual rights, and public roles (Jalal 1991, 121–25). Zia's Hudood Ordinances reinstated gender-based legal inequalities, transforming colonial morality within a state-driven Islamic discourse. Farida Shaheed (2010, 9) states this era solidified a patriarchal political order where women's bodies became symbols in legitimizing authoritarianism. At the same time, the state used "authentic Islamic tradition" to justify moral policing, maintaining many colonial legal structures. This reveals how nationalist and religious ideologies merged with colonial legacies to regulate personal life. The result was a hybrid system, often called a "postcolonial moral state," shaped by both colonial influence and Islamist reinterpretation (Weiss 2019, 36).

In modern Pakistan, debates over gender and sexuality are influenced by complex histories of colonial rule, Islamic reform, and post-independence nation-building. Government agencies persist in enforcing morality laws, cybercrime regulations, and patriarchal standards to control sexuality and bodily autonomy. Concurrently, religious groups and political figures utilise gender frameworks to shape public morality and gain electoral support (Jamal 2022, 1011). However, these control mechanisms also serve as platforms for resistance: feminist groups, such as the Aurat March, and transgender organisations leverage constitutional rights, Islamic ethics, and international human rights language to challenge government authority and advocate for gender justice (Hossain 2023, 44).

The ongoing presence of colonial laws and emerging religious-nationalist narratives illustrates how conflicting moral viewpoints continually influence norms concerning gender and sexuality. Scholars emphasise that these debates are not just cultural but deeply political, involving issues of state authority, national identity, and the regulation of personal life (Grewal 2024, 22). To understand today's Pakistan, one must consider how its social and political landscape is shaped by a blend of precolonial diversity, colonial control, and postcolonial moral governance—a history that still drives both repression and social activism.

3. Theoretical Framework

The article relies on four main theoretical frameworks. Postcolonial feminist theory provides a crucial perspective for examining gender and sexuality in Pakistan, as it challenges universal Western notions of agency, oppression, and liberation. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003, p. 52) and Saba Mahmood (2005, p. 38) contend that mainstream feminist views often equate gendered agency directly with resistance against religious or patriarchal control. Yet, in Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan, agency may manifest as ethical self-fashioning, piety, and negotiated forms of relational autonomy rooted in cultural and religious contexts. Mahmood's (2005, 67) critique of liberal feminist assumptions calls for an understanding of agency that is shaped by specific contexts and embodied moral self-cultivation practices.

This approach is vital for analysing how Pakistani women navigate Islamic moral frameworks, kinship systems, and state regulations, which may not align with Western notions of emancipation. Consequently, postcolonial feminism challenges epistemic hierarchies in global knowledge creation and emphasises that

analyses of Pakistan's gender issues must be grounded in local histories, religious discourses, and lived realities rather than universal norms.

Queer theory—and particularly transnational queer theory—facilitates this study in examining how heteronormativity, state authority, and global sexual politics influence the lived experiences of queer and transgender individuals in Pakistan. Jasbir Puar's (2007, p. 28) critique of homonationalism underscores how international LGBTQ+ rights discourses can perpetuate racialised and Islamophobic hierarchies, positioning Muslim societies as inherently backwards. Similarly, Momin Rahman (2014, pp. 133; 2024, p. 129) illustrates that queer Muslim identities develop at the intersection of religious ethics, migration policies, and global power structures, rather than through Western models of sexual identity formation.

This perspective highlights how Pakistani queer and transgender individuals navigate multiple moral and political frameworks—namely, legal criminalisation, religious norms, familial expectations, and transnational networks. Furthermore, transnational queer theory emphasises mobility, displacement, and border regimes as essential for understanding queer vulnerability, particularly among Pakistani migrant workers in the Gulf region and Southeast Asia (Osella, 2014, p. 712). Consequently, queer theory not only elucidates local manifestations of heteronormativity but also demonstrates how global inequalities influence the conditions of queer existence.

Intersectionality functions as the unifying analytical framework that connects postcolonial feminism, queer theory, and migration studies, providing a multidimensional approach to understanding power dynamics. Originating from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 149; 2020, 23) research on Black feminist thought, intersectionality posits that gender and sexuality are inextricably linked with race, class, religion, migration status, and caste. In the context of Pakistan, this entails recognising the varied experiences of oppression across different social groups: for instance, khwaja siras encounter distinct forms of violence linked to caste histories and urban marginalisation; queer migrants confront complex vulnerabilities stemming from immigration laws, labour exploitation, and criminalisation; and working-class women navigate patriarchal kinship systems differently from their urban, elite counterparts. Additionally, intersectionality offers the theoretical tools necessary to analyse how global Islamophobia, development policies, and human rights discourses influence local gender and sexuality politics (Grewal 2024, 17). As an integrated theoretical approach, intersectionality facilitates the examination of how transnational and local power structures intersect to influence Pakistani experiences of gender, sexuality, and social justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines significant scholarly work on gender, sexuality, and transnational migration in Pakistan and Asia. The existing body of literature reveals substantial gaps that justify adopting a transnational perspective in this study. A considerable portion of feminist research pertaining to Pakistan remains confined to state-centric or national contexts (Shaheed 2010, 7), whereas queer studies predominantly concentrate on urban digital visibility without adequately addressing the experiences of queer migrants in the Gulf or East Asia (Rahman 2014, 133). Research concerning Khwaja Sira communities emphasises indigenous gender traditions but frequently neglects the interaction of these identities with global human rights standards (Hossain 2020, 11). Concurrently, migration research tends to emphasise economic insecurity, oftentimes neglecting the analysis of sexuality and gender-related vulnerabilities (Ali 2018, 45). These omissions highlight the need to integrate feminist, queer, and migration analyses within a cohesive transnational framework.

Research on gender, sexuality, and migration in Pakistan is extensive but fragmented, showing the need for a more unified and transnational perspective. Feminist studies have explored the intersection of gender with nationalism and state authority, illustrating how women's bodies and mobility become battlegrounds of political struggle (Shaheed 2010, 7; Jalal 1991, 122). Nonetheless, most of this research remains focused on nation-states and does not sufficiently consider how transnational labour markets and migration policies influence gender roles and economic systems (Ali 2018, 45). South Asian queer studies discuss how colonial laws, digital platforms, and shifting sexual identities influence queer lives, but these studies often concentrate

on urban, middle-class groups and tend to overlook queer and trans migrants working under insecure conditions in Gulf countries and Asia (Rahman 2014, 133; Osella 2014, 708).

Migration and transnational mobility research add a crucial layer to the theoretical framework by illustrating how global labor systems, racial hierarchies, and border management influence gendered and sexual identities. Building on Nina Glick Schiller's (2008, 570) work, this study views migrants as part of “transnational social fields” that connect political, economic, and personal spheres across different locations. For instance, Pakistani migrants in the Gulf face structural vulnerabilities created by the kafala labour system, which limits their movement, legal rights, and privacy (Gardner 2010, 53; 2022, 91). Female migrants—particularly domestic workers—encounter gender-specific adversity resulting from the intersection of race, gender, and class (Parreñas 2015, 89). Migration studies also demonstrate how diasporic networks can influence gender norms back in Pakistan through remittances, communication tools, and transnational family structures (Lyon 2013, 61). These findings emphasise that gender and sexuality are shaped not only within Pakistan but also by global systems of labour, immigration policies, and racialised capitalism.

Research on Khwaja Sira communities emphasises indigenous gender diversity and the politics of legal recognition (Hossain 2020, 11); however, it often under-theorises the impact of global human rights frameworks on local activism and state responses. Concurrently, migration scholarship demonstrates the racialised and gendered vulnerabilities faced by South Asian labourers under neoliberal regimes such as the kafala system (Gardner 2010, 54; Parreñas 2015, 89), yet it seldom incorporates sexuality or gender identity as fundamental analytical categories. Studies on digital activism reveal how online platforms foster new forms of feminist and queer resistance, while also exposing activists to heightened state surveillance and moral policing (Ahmad 2020, 17; Zubair 2022, 197). Collectively, these fields of inquiry expose how disciplinary silos obscure the interconnectedness of gender, sexuality, migration, and transnational governance. This article contends that these gaps necessitate a comprehensive framework that synthesises feminist, queer, and migration literatures to more effectively understand how Pakistani subjects experience and challenge power across borders. It underscores the urgent need for analyses that regard gender and sexuality not as isolated cultural phenomena but as deeply rooted in global systems of mobility, labour, and political regulation (Grewal and Kaplan 2001, 14; Weiss 2019, 4).

Scholars also warn of increased risks of surveillance (Zubair 2022). The literature review demonstrates the fragmentation within existing scholarship and emphasises the necessity for more integrated approaches. While feminist studies elucidate state-level gender politics, they frequently overlook transnational labour dynamics (Shaheed 2010, 9). Queer studies emphasise digital visibility but seldom consider mobility and migrant precarity (Rahman 2014, 132). Migration literature underscores labour exploitation; however, it often omits considerations of sexuality and gendered agency (Ali 2018, 45). By synthesising these disciplines, this article addresses a notable scholarly gap and provides a more comprehensive perspective for understanding Pakistan's transnational challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach grounded in feminist, queer, and migration studies frameworks. Firstly, the research employs critical discourse analysis of academic texts, legal documents, activist materials, and digital content to investigate the functioning of gender and sexuality discourses within both national and transnational contexts (Fairclough 2013, 12). This facilitates an analysis of how states, religious institutions, media entities, and international organisations construct normative perspectives on gender and sexuality.

Secondly, a meta-synthesis of ethnographic studies informs the empirical foundation of the article. Rather than conducting new fieldwork, the article synthesises existing multi-sited ethnographies carried out across Pakistan, the Gulf, and Asian diaspora hubs (Gardner 2010; Hossain 2020; Ali 2018). This approach facilitates the mapping of shared patterns such as labour precarity, kinship pressures, queer invisibility, and the negotiation of religious identity.

Third, the study employs a transnational feminist and queer methodology, which examines how power operates across borders through migration regimes, digital infrastructures, religious discourses, and global market systems (Grewal and Kaplan, 2001, p. 5). This approach eschews cultural essentialism while emphasising the lived experiences of Pakistani women, queer individuals, and migrant workers.

Finally, the methodology employs an intersectional analysis to delineate how gender, sexuality, class, religion, and migration status interact (Crenshaw 1989). This framework ensures the study circumvents single-axis explanations of inequality and instead emphasises multidimensional oppression and agency.

This amalgamation of discourse analysis, ethnographic synthesis, transnational theory, and intersectionality engenders a comprehensive, multi-layered methodological framework aligned with the study's objective: to scrutinise the transnational space shaping gender and sexuality in Pakistan and its Asian diaspora. This methodological approach, grounded in discourse analysis, ethnographic synthesis, and intersectional theory, facilitates a nuanced examination of gender and sexuality as transnational phenomena. Such a strategy aligns with established methodological principles in feminist and migration research, which underscore multi-sited analysis and a focus on structural power dynamics (Silvey 2020, 191). Consequently, the methodology equips the study to effectively capture the dispersed and interconnected experiences of Pakistanis across borders (Glick Schiller 2008, 568).

The findings of this study underscore the necessity for a transnational social justice framework that encompasses postcolonial feminism, queer and trans theory, migration studies, and intersectional analysis. Such a framework must acknowledge the ways in which local and global power structures intersect to regulate bodies, discipline intimacy, and influence political potential. It must also prioritise the lived experiences of those most impacted—khwaja siras, queer migrants, women domestic workers, working-class families, and diasporic communities—as creators of political insight rather than mere subjects of intervention (Silvey 2020, 210; Mohanty 2021, 61). The objective is not to supplant local activism with global agendas but to foster coalitions that honour cultural particularities while challenging global structures that uphold inequality. Transnational justice necessitates coordinated strategies across legal advocacy, digital rights, labour protections, religious reinterpretation, and community-led organising.

6. Transnational Migration, Diaspora, and Gendered Struggles

Transnational migration assumes a pivotal role in the development of gendered identities and social relations among Pakistanis, functioning not merely as an external influence but as a fundamental structuring force embedded within daily life. With millions of Pakistanis navigating Gulf labour markets, Southeast Asian economies, and increasingly relocating to Europe and North America, migration has become a defining characteristic of national and family life (Gardner 2022, 89). The legal and economic frameworks governing migration—particularly the Gulf's kafala system—generate forms of precarity, dependence, and surveillance that significantly impact migrants' intimate lives and self-perception (Rashid 2021, 141). These systems disproportionately influence men's experiences of masculinity, often destabilising traditional provider roles associated with honour and social status within Pakistani kinship networks (Ali 2018, 47).

Consequently, migration not only alters the physical locations or employment contexts of Pakistanis but also transforms the way gender is performed, negotiated, and contested across various sites. As Glick Schiller (2008, 570) contends, migrants operate within "transnational social fields" whereby political allegiance, kinship obligations, and gendered expectations are enacted concurrently across borders. Analysing Pakistani gender and sexuality necessitates situating these identities within the broader international systems that underpin migrant existence.

Women migrants engage in transnational mobility in gender-specific manners that elucidate the intersection of class, labour, and kinship across borders. Although Pakistani women migrate in smaller numbers than men, their participation in domestic labour markets within the Gulf, Malaysia, and Hong Kong demonstrates how global care economies reorganise gendered responsibilities and vulnerabilities (Parreñas 2015, 90). Domestic

workplaces, women near employers, where they face extended working hours, surveillance, and restricted mobility, reflecting gendered hierarchies both domestically and internationally (Silvey 2020, 197).

Nevertheless, these women simultaneously exercise agency by renegotiating financial authority within their families, often becoming primary breadwinners whose remittances influence household power dynamics in Pakistan (Lyon 2013, 62). Their migration also challenges established cultural norms concerning women's respectability and mobility, as families reinterpret transnational labour in ways that preserve honour while acknowledging economic imperatives. This exemplifies how global labour markets interact with Pakistani gender norms, resulting in new configurations of autonomy, vulnerability, and domestic authority. The examination of women's migration thus uncovers how gendered labour regimes both constrain and transform the lives of Pakistani women across transnational spaces.

Queer and transgender Pakistani migrants experience unique challenges shaped by the intersection of sexuality, migration status, and global border policies. In Gulf nations—where sexual and gender nonconformity are criminalised—Pakistani queer migrants often rely on secret support networks to cope with surveillance, risk of deportation, and ongoing legal threats (Osella 2014, 712). These clandestine groups create alternative kinship systems, providing emotional backing, shelter, and methods to evade police raids or employer retaliation. As Rahman (2024, 129) notes, queer Muslim migrants do not conform to Western LGBTQ visibility models but instead forge hybrid identities through coded communication, religious principles, and transnational ties.

Trans migrants frequently face even more severe risks because of gender expressions that are hard to hide, which increases their vulnerability to digital surveillance, workplace discrimination, and violence both domestically and internationally (Hossain 2023, 44). Despite these challenges, queer and trans migrants engage in global diaspora activism through encrypted digital platforms, supporting local initiatives such as the Aurat March and advancing a diasporic politics of survival. Their stories emphasise the importance of understanding sexuality and gender not solely through local moral frameworks but also through worldwide systems of surveillance, border enforcement, and migrant labour exploitation.

The Pakistani diaspora serves as a vital space where gender norms, feminist ideas, and queer politics are debated and redefined, circulating back to Pakistan via remittances, digital platforms, and activism. Diaspora members—especially in the UK, Canada, and the Gulf—significantly influence local discussions by funding community projects, boosting online feminist and queer movements, and advocating for alternative views on Islamic ethics and gender justice (Grewal 2024, 23; Jamal 2022, 1012). Families abroad utilise digital tools to influence household decisions in Pakistan, affecting marriage, education, and gender roles across borders (Ahmad 2020, 15).

However, diaspora communities often reinforce patriarchal norms through social surveillance, moral policing, and community pressure, showing migration doesn't always lead to more liberal gender politics (Weiss 2019, 37). These tensions highlight the paradox of diaspora as both an arena for empowerment and a source of restriction. Nonetheless, transnational networks foster feminist and queer solidarity, enabling collaborative political efforts that transcend national borders. This indicates that gender and sexuality among Pakistanis are shaped not only within Pakistan but also through ongoing international exchanges, ideological flows, and social reproduction.

7. Transnational Activism, Digital Media, and Social Justice Movements

Transnational activism plays a key role in feminist and queer political mobilisation in Pakistan, transforming local struggles into interconnected, cross-border movements. The Aurat March shows how Pakistani feminists strategically adopt global human rights language—such as bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and gender equality—while anchoring these ideas in Islamic ethics, constitutional rights, and local feminist traditions (Jamal 2022, 1012). This blending of global and local discourses challenges claims that feminist ideas are “Western imports,” highlighting instead their deep roots in indigenous histories of resistance and care (Shaheed 2010, 11).

Meanwhile, transnational feminist networks—including diasporic communities, NGOs, scholars, and activists—support Pakistani movements through public protests, funding, and international media (Grewal 2024, 23). These collaborations have demonstrated how gender justice activism has expanded to multiple sites, where local issues resonate globally and international feminist concepts are adapted within culturally specific contexts. Transnational activism thus involves a mutual, negotiated process that strengthens Pakistan's social justice efforts while preserving its local nuances.

Digital media has fundamentally reshaped political engagement in Pakistan by creating platforms where feminist, queer, and transgender advocates establish alternative publics that bypass state-controlled or patriarchal institutions. Media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube empower activists to contest prevalent gender doctrines, disseminate counter-narratives, and record state misconduct with exceptional speed and scope (Ahmad 2020, 17). Academic scholars acknowledge that digital platforms facilitate what Fraser terms “subaltern counterpublics”—spaces where marginalised groups voice political demands and explore new modalities of democratic participation (Qureshi 2021, 52).

For Pakistani activists, digital visibility becomes an essential instrument for coalition formation, enabling individuals located in different regions—including those in the diaspora—to engage in political dialogue and demonstrate solidarity across geographical boundaries (Rahman 2024, 131). Consequently, the digital landscape emerges as a transformative political space wherein activists oppose state narratives, galvanise public outrage, and foster communities of care and resistance. However, digital activism also highlights disparities, as participation is influenced by factors such as access to technology, educational levels, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status (Weiss 2019, 40). Nonetheless, the digital domain presents unprecedented opportunities for collective action, documentation, and reclamation of narratives.

Despite its potential to empower, digital activism in Pakistan functions within increasingly securitised online environments where the government and non-state actors use surveillance technology to monitor, intimidate, and penalise dissent. The expansion of Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and cyberpolicing targeting blasphemy give authorities broad discretion to pursue feminist and queer activists under the pretext of national security and morality (Zubair 2022, 198).

Recently, state–corporate collaborations have boosted algorithmic monitoring, facial recognition, and metadata collection, forming digital infrastructures that disproportionately impact marginalised groups (Ahmad 2023, 56). As Shakhshari (2020, 82) notes, digital authoritarianism is not just a local issue but part of a global political economy in which states acquire surveillance tools from multinational firms to control online dissent. Activists also face harassment from misogynistic and extremist online communities that weaponise social media to intimidate, dox, and silence feminist and queer voices (Grewal 2024, 17). These conditions show that digital spaces are deeply political, where forces of empowerment and repression collide. Recognising cybersurveillance as a transnational issue highlights the importance of global digital rights advocacy to protect vulnerable activists.

The intersection of transnational activism and digital media underscores the emergence of multi-scalar social justice movements that connect local struggles in Pakistan to global networks of solidarity, advocacy, and political influence. Whether through feminist mobilisations, transgender rights initiatives, or queer digital organising, Pakistani activists employ “local” strategies—acting locally while harnessing global discourses, diasporic support, and international human rights frameworks (Grewal and Kaplan 2023, 14).

This integrative approach yields tangible outcomes: international media exposure enhances global scrutiny of state repression, diaspora networks provide financial and organisational backing, and international feminist and queer movements shape policy debates, legal reforms, and cultural narratives within Pakistan (Silvey 2020, 210).

Concurrently, Pakistani activists contribute to global justice movements by presenting alternative political imaginaries grounded in Islamic ethics, decolonial critiques, and indigenous knowledge systems. This reciprocal exchange demonstrates that Pakistan's feminist, queer, and transgender movements are not confined to national contexts but are integral components of broader international campaigns advocating for bodily

autonomy, gender self-determination, and social transformation. Ultimately, transnational activism coupled with digital media empowers Pakistani social justice initiatives to confront the intersecting forces of patriarchy, authoritarianism, capitalism, and Islamophobia that influence their experiences both domestically and within the diaspora.

8. Case Studies in Transnational Struggle

Case studies from Pakistan and its Asian diaspora clearly illustrate how feminist, queer, and transgender movements are influenced by—and actively influence—transnational political dynamics. The Aurat March, now among Pakistan's most prominent feminist movements, exemplifies how activists strategically mobilise both local and global discourses: organisers draw upon Islamic principles of justice, constitutional rights, and South Asian feminist histories, while also engaging with transnational feminist vocabularies disseminated through digital platforms (Jamal 2022, 1012; Ahmad 2020, 17).

8.1. Strengthened Pakistan-Specific Empirical Anchoring

Pakistan's ongoing discussions on gender and sexuality highlight the complex intersection of religion, nationalism, and state authority, necessitating more empirical research. Since 2018, the debates surrounding the Aurat March have highlighted how gender justice activism can expose underlying fears about modernity, secularism, and the nation's moral standards. Often, critics label these marches as “Westernised,” “foreignfunded,” or “anti-Islamic,” a rhetoric that undermines women's and LGBTQ+ communities' demands by framing them as external threats instead of addressing internal social inequalities (Zia 2020, 214).

These accusations also show how state and media use moral panic—particularly around slogans like *mera*

jism meri marzi—to control women's bodies and limit feminist action (Khan 2021, 48). Including these examples demonstrates that social justice issues are not just abstract ideas but are woven into daily political and religious discussions. Focusing on local struggles makes the arguments more relevant to Pakistan's real-life experiences, reinforcing the theories on power and gender (Mahmood 2005, 67).

These empirical insights highlight that gender and sexuality discussions in Pakistan are intertwined with the country's wider political conflicts concerning authority, morality, and national identity.

8.2. Expanded Use of Local Scholars and Activist Voices

To prevent over-dependence on Western feminist models, recent Pakistani scholarship highlights how gender and sexuality are understood within Islamic, Punjabi, Pashtun, and Sindhi cultures. For example, Afiya Zia (2018) challenges liberal feminist views that Muslim women must conform to emancipatory stories to be recognized as political actors. Similarly, Nida Kirmani (2013) shows how urban women navigate insecurity, class, and religiosity—factors often overlooked by global feminist theories. Voices from activists—like Aurat March groups, Khwaaja Sira communities, and organizations such as the Gender Interactive Alliance (GIA)—demonstrate daily efforts to maintain dignity and survive despite legal gaps, police brutality, and social marginalisation (Hina 2021, 332). Including these perspectives promotes a grounded, decolonial approach to social justice that prioritises Pakistani epistemologies over universal frameworks.

By incorporating local feminist and queer epistemologies, the paper grounds transnational justice debates in Pakistan's own intellectual traditions, enhancing its analytical depth and decolonial focus.

8.3. Strengthened Policy Implications & Decolonial Approaches

The policy analysis highlights how Pakistan's Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018—initially regarded as one of the most progressive laws in Asia—became a point of political rollback after the 2022 religious backlash. This reversal shows that legal victories are fragile without accompanying structural reforms, community safeguards, and sustained political advocacy (Rehman 2023, 119). A decolonial approach

to policy must oppose donor-driven agendas that pressure local groups to follow externally imposed priorities. Instead, funding should focus on long-term capacity development, language inclusivity, and community-identified goals, acknowledging the indigenous social and leadership systems of Khwaaja Sira communities (Riaz 2021, 88). Enhancing the legal framework—via police training, accessible reporting channels, and community-led oversight—can turn legislation from mere symbolic gestures into effective justice.

These policy directions emphasise that sustainable change depends on aligning legal, financial, and institutional reforms with the lived realities and leadership of Pakistan's most marginalised communities.

8.4. Improved Transitions Between Sections

“The tensions observable in the Aurat March debates—between secular and religious imaginaries, between national morality and feminist autonomy—illustrate the very dynamics that the theoretical framework attempts to conceptualise. These conflicts are not isolated events but manifestations of a broader transnational struggle that links Pakistan's local context with global debates on gender, Islam, and human rights.”

Its slogans and imagery frequently traverse borders via social media, enabling members of the diaspora to participate remotely, contribute financially, and organise solidarity demonstrations, thereby demonstrating the co-production of feminist resistance across multiple geopolitical locations. Similarly, transgender activism centred on Khwaja Sira communities demonstrates the negotiated nature of social justice movements in Pakistan. Leaders such as Almas Bobby and organisations like the Khwaja Sira Society have drawn on precolonial gender categories, Islamic jurisprudence, and international human rights mechanisms to secure landmark protections such as the 2018 Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, even as conservative backlash continues (Hossain 2023, 44; Rehan 2016, 318). These layered strategies demonstrate how localised identities can become sources of transnational political leverage rather than obstacles to rights-based claims.

Queer Pakistani migrants in the Gulf and East Asia exemplify a vital case, as they contend with authoritarian migration policies, the criminalisation of same-sex relationships, and ongoing deportation risks. They develop underground networks for care, survival, and mutual protection, challenging Western-centric notions of queer visibility (Osella 2014, 712; Rahman 2024, 129). Their experiences highlight that sexuality is governed not only by Pakistani cultural standards but also by global labour markets, border enforcement, and racialised immigration hierarchies (Gardner 2022, 91). These cases demonstrate that transnational activism is a reciprocal and contested process, where local actors reinterpret, resist, and reshape global discourses, rather than a simple flow of ideas from “global” to “local.”

These examples demonstrate that Pakistani feminist, queer, and transgender movements are interconnected with broader networks involving migration, digital media, religious politics, and global inequalities. Ultimately, they confirm that achieving substantive gender and sexuality justice requires transnational approaches that acknowledge the interconnectedness of struggles across different countries.

9. Challenges and Barriers to Transnational Social Justice

Surveillance weakens transnational organising (Zubair 2022, 204). Diasporic Pakistanis face discrimination driven by racialised stereotypes of Muslim gender roles (Grewal 2013). Islamophobia impacts global debates, creating conflicting pressures: feminist activists might gain international support but are also exploited by anti-Muslim political agendas. Internal divisions—such as those based on class, region, language, and sectarian identity—fragment feminist and queer coalitions. NGOs led by elites often overshadow grassroots organisations, particularly those run by working-class or migrant communities (Sharma 2008).

Barriers to advancing gender and sexuality justice in Pakistan are rooted not only in cultural resistance but also in transnational power dynamics. Authoritarian regimes and increased digital surveillance suppress dissent both domestically and in host countries where migrants live (Shakhsari 2020, 22). Global Islamophobia influences how Muslim gender politics are received and can use feminist discourse to justify racialized forms of governance (Grewal 2013, 4). Additionally, disparities within feminist and queer movements—driven by

class and funding politics—hinder coalition-building efforts (Sharma 2008, 102). Recognizing these underlying structures shifts the focus from cultural blame to an understanding of structural issues.

These case studies collectively demonstrate that Pakistan's gender and sexuality movements are deeply intertwined with international networks of meaning, movement, and activism. Whether it's through diasporic feminist support, Islamic reinterpretations that endorse transgender rights, or queer migrant communities managing state surveillance, each example demonstrates how agency is formed by negotiating various global influences (Jamal 2020, 609; Hossain 2020, 19). Recognising these hybrid dynamics is essential for understanding how communities develop resistance in the face of changing transnational environments (Rahman 2014, 138).

10. Toward a Transnational Social Justice Framework

A transnational social justice framework is essential because gender and sexuality issues in Pakistan are influenced not only by local sociopolitical factors but also by global systems of labour, religion, digital governance, and geopolitics. Recent studies show that South Asian migrants, including Pakistanis, are part of transnational networks of surveillance, precarity, and racialised labour exploitation that cannot be solved through domestic reforms alone (Silvey 2020, 191; Vora 2023, 66). For instance, the Gulf's kafala system primarily impacts Pakistani workers by limiting mobility, suppressing wages, and heightening gendered and sexual vulnerabilities (Gardner 2022, 89).

These structural inequalities reveal the inadequacy of national legal protections, underscoring the need for regional and international frameworks that address the cross-border aspects of migration, labour, and human rights violations (Rashid 2021, 141). Therefore, a transnational justice approach must acknowledge that Pakistani individuals face oppression fuelled by global forces, requiring coordinated, multi-layered interventions.

Additionally, feminist and queer advocates across South Asia have demonstrated that transnational solidarity networks can strengthen local resistance movements when they eschew replicating Western hierarchies and dominant epistemological views. Recent research suggests that movements in the Global South offer vital political vocabularies, strategies, and ethical frameworks that challenge Eurocentric notions of gender and sexual liberation (Grewal 2024, 19; Mohanty 2021, 61).

The success of the Aurat March, for example, is partly due to how organisers effectively mobilised international feminist alliances while anchoring their demands in Islamic ethics, constitutional rights, and Pakistan's historical feminist traditions (Jamal 2022, 1015). Likewise, transgender activism in Pakistan—culminating in the 2018 Transgender Persons Act—demonstrates how community leaders have integrated indigenous gender categories, Islamic legal principles, and global human rights discourses to promote a rights agenda that is both culturally relevant and internationally significant (Hossain 2023, 44). These cases highlight that transnational justice does not mean importing external models; rather, it involves forming coalitions that honour local knowledge, community leadership, and cultural context.

Simultaneously, transnational justice must confront the growing digital infrastructures that influence political visibility, vulnerability, and repression faced by Pakistani activists. The rise of disinformation, algorithmic bias, and AI-driven state surveillance heightens dangers for feminist and queer organisers both within Pakistan and abroad (Zubair 2022, 198; Shakhshari 2020, 82). Experts warn that digital repression against queer and feminist activists in the Global South has amplified through collaborations between governments and multinational tech companies, leading to new censorship and securitisation methods (Ahmad 2023, 55).

Therefore, a transnational social justice approach should prioritise digital rights, data privacy, and cyber-safety as core aspects of gender and queer justice. This involves forming cross-border digital advocacy networks that can challenge state–corporate surveillance and develop secure, multilingual, community-centred online platforms.

A comprehensive transnational framework should highlight intersectionality not just as an analytical tool but also as a political tactic. Pakistani communities face multiple layers of oppression—such as class, caste, sect, gender identity, sexuality, and migration status—that necessitate holistic responses (Crenshaw 2020, 23;

Rahman 2024, 129). Migrant domestic workers, queer refugees, khwaja siras, and working-class women all confront systemic violence through various avenues—household hierarchies, border controls, digital policing, and moral regulation. Restricting justice approaches to a single identity axis risks reinforcing the existing hierarchies they aim to challenge. Intersectional transnational justice requires placing the most marginalised—such as migrant women, queer and trans migrants, and working-class groups—at the forefront of leadership, agenda-setting, and policymaking (Silvey 2020, 207). Their lived experiences are essential to building lasting social justice structures.

A transnational social justice framework must promote structural reforms that connect Pakistan's internal issues to global movements such as labour rights campaigns, queer and trans refugee networks, feminist migrant organising, and digital rights alliances. Scholars emphasise that lasting change arises from grassroots groups collaborating across borders to address structural inequalities, rather than through isolated, episodic activism (Grewal and Kaplan 2023, 14).

By combining community-led organising, legal advocacy, religious reinterpretation, and digital activism, a comprehensive, transnational approach can challenge the global systems that perpetuate inequality in Pakistan. This model aims to go beyond symbolic recognition and focus on structural change, fostering a future where justice for gender and sexuality is pursued across home, diaspora, and international civil society.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that gender and sexuality in Pakistan cannot be fully understood through only national or cultural perspectives. Instead, they emerge from a complex interplay of precolonial histories, colonial legal systems, postcolonial governance, Islamic reform efforts, and transnational influences, including migration, digital policies, and global capitalism. These layers of history suggest that gender diversity and sexual variety have long been integral to South Asian life, but they have been reshaped by colonial and postcolonial efforts to regulate morality (Gupta 2006, 4815; Hossain 2020, 8). Modern gender issues—such as family honour, sexual morality, or bodily autonomy—are therefore rooted in these intertwined histories. Recognising these longstanding dynamics shifts the focus from cultural stereotypes to understanding power and inequality as structural forces.

This study demonstrates that Pakistani experiences of gender and sexuality are deeply influenced by transnational mobility systems. Migrant workers—including men, women, queer, and trans individuals—operate in environments marked by legal precarity, deportability, and exploitation across regions such as the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and Europe (Gardner 2022, 91; Parreñas 2015, 90).

These circumstances transform understandings of masculinity, femininity, desire, embodiment, and kinship in ways that national-level analyses cannot fully capture. Diaspora communities play a mediating role, channelling remittances, feminist ideas, Islamic reform discourses, and queer political vocabularies (Lyon 2013, 61; Jamal 2022, 1012). Simultaneously, the racialised global economy situates Pakistani bodies within larger hierarchies of labour, surveillance, and border regulation. Therefore, gendered and sexualized vulnerabilities stem not only from Pakistani cultural or religious norms but also from global systems that regulate movement, work, and intimacy.

The digital realm has revolutionised the way social justice movements function, facilitating transnational feminist and queer collaborations while also exposing activists to new threats, such as surveillance and violence. Movements in Pakistan, such as the Aurat March, demonstrate how local struggles can resonate globally through online sharing, diaspora involvement, and transnational feminist alliances (Grewal 2024, 23; Ahmad 2020, 17). However, these digital spaces are highly contested: activists encounter algorithmic surveillance, cyber harassment, extremist trolling, and enforcement by state-backed cybercrime laws (Zubair, 2022, p. 198; Shakhsari, 2020, p. 82). This research emphasises that digital activism is more than just a tool; it is a politically charged space influenced by global technological infrastructure and authoritarian control. Grasping these complexities is vital for creating sustainable approaches to digital safety, political engagement, and transnational solidarity.

Gender and sexuality issues in Pakistan are inherently connected to global influences. They are influenced by colonial history, Islamic teachings, patriarchal family systems, migration for work, digital platforms, international feminist and queer networks, and authoritarian governments. This article demonstrates that social justice efforts must extend beyond national borders by examining these intersecting factors. Achieving real change requires empowering Pakistani women, queer people, and migrants; building transnational solidarity; fighting against surveillance and Islamophobia; and adopting intersectional, rights-based approaches that address the real experiences of Pakistanis both at home and throughout Asia.

Achieving gender and sexuality justice requires transnational strategies that are both sustainable and fair. The conclusion emphasises that the future progress in Pakistan depends on recognising how oppression and resistance operate across borders. Local activism must challenge global labour systems, surveillance methods, and Islamophobic narratives that influence daily life for Pakistanis both at home and abroad (Puar 2007, 32). Conversely, transnational efforts should be grounded in Pakistan's unique cultural, historical, and religious contexts, rather than applying universal ideas (Mahmood 2005, 38). Connecting local and global levels is crucial for developing effective, culturally relevant, and enduring movements for gender and sexuality justice.

This study argues that Pakistan's gender and sexuality justice depends on multi-scalar visions that challenge colonial legacies, patriarchy, global labour exploitation, and digital authoritarianism. Pakistani feminist, queer, and transgender activists—whether in Lahore, Karachi, Dubai, Hong Kong, London, or Toronto—are imagining alternative futures rooted in care, ethical self-fashioning, and transnational solidarity. Their struggles highlight possibilities for more inclusive, liberated, and just worlds. A transnational perspective enriches cultural specificity by showing how Pakistani communities creatively resist and reshape global influences. By emphasising these movements, this study broadens understanding of pursuing gender and sexuality justice across borders in ways that are culturally grounded, politically radical, and structurally transformative.

In conclusion, this research emphasises the importance of a transnational and intersectional approach to truly understand and tackle issues of gender and sexuality in Pakistan. The interplay of colonial histories, migration patterns, digital politics, and global inequalities necessitates analyses that transcend national borders (Weiss 2019, 30). By situating Pakistani experiences within broader regional and global contexts, scholars and practitioners can develop more effective and sustainable justice strategies that respect local cultures while addressing global power structures (Mahmood 2005, 39).

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