



A Transnational Community of Pakistani Muslim Women: Narratives of Rights, Honor, and Wisdom in a Women's Education Project

AYESHA KHURSHID

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Using ethnographic data, this article explores how Muslim women teachers from low-income Pakistani communities employ the notion of “wisdom” to construct and perform their educated subjectivity in a transnational women’s education project. Through Butler’s performativity framework, I demonstrate how local and global discourses overlap to shape narratives that define individual rights as well as family honor as part of the educated subjectivity of Pakistani Muslim women. [Muslim women, women’s education, human rights, performativity, globalization]

In February 2010, the Taliban attacked a military convoy carrying Pakistani and American military personnel in northwest Pakistan. A number of American and Pakistani soldiers, as well as Pakistani schoolgirls, were wounded or killed. The convoy was traveling to the inauguration ceremony of a girls’ high school that had previously been destroyed by the Taliban. The school was rebuilt with assistance from the United States after the Pakistani military forced the Taliban to flee the area.

The incident highlighted the keen interest of the state of Pakistan and the United States in promoting women’s education in Pakistan. In the aftermath of 9/11, women’s education in Pakistan has attracted unprecedented monetary, political, and now military investment from both Western states and international development agencies. Interestingly, in a post-colonial Muslim state facing grave economic and political issues, education for women has become the primary focus of national and international actors. As Pakistan has become the central state in the war on global terrorism, national and international policies focusing on women’s education have connected education for women directly to efforts to modernize Pakistani society. This discourse of change is premised on a particular subjectivity of Pakistani Muslim women positioned as agents of change who can modernize children, the family, and society. Education is expected to empower Pakistani women by providing them opportunities to learn about and practice their individual rights in domestic, economic, social, and political realms. This particular gendered subjectivity of women, embedded in the notions of “universal human rights,” “democracy,” and “modernity,” informs the media and policy discourses of the liberal nation-making project focused on Pakistan.

In this article, I draw on ethnographic data to explore the ways in which women teachers who work in community schools supported by a transnational development organization receive, contest, and translate international educational policies. Specifically, I emphasize how these teachers negotiate multiple discourses—local and global—about education, gender, and modernity—tradition to (de)construct their subjectivities as educated women, teachers, and family and community members. This negotiation, I argue, is manifested most succinctly in the way teachers assemble and perform the notion of “wisdom,” understood as the ability to make decisions informed by knowledge about right and wrong, as a virtue of educated people. I analyze how wisdom, as an enactment of individual rights and family honor in a local context, provides nuanced insights into the

processes of international educational reforms operating on particular notions of women's rights, democracy, and modernity. Thus, I argue that the modern educated subjectivity of Pakistani women from low-income communities is informed by a complex movement between the globally circulating "empowerment through individual rights" discourse and their desire to establish and maintain strong family and community ties. I employ the performativity framework by Butler (1993, 1999) to examine how performance of wisdom as the virtue informed by education constitutes the subjectivities of the women participants of this study.

Butler argues that subjects are socially constructed through iterative and repetitive performances. In her theory, gender identity is not a stable and/or universal identity but is a stylized repetition of acts through time in a particular context (Butler 1997, 1999). As the international development regime aims to produce empowered Muslim women through education in countries like Pakistan, the participants of this study constructed their empowered and educated identities through the notion and practice of wisdom. It is at the nexus of local and global knowledge systems that these women participants perform wisdom to both animate and bring coherence to the discourses of human rights and honor, which are usually framed as opposing values. I argue that the performance of wisdom by the women participants of this study is not a mere reflection of the global becoming local but illustrates how the local constitutes the global in hybrid ways.

In the following sections, after defining the theoretical construct of wisdom, I review the historical and contemporary subjectivity of Muslim women embedded in global discourses on human rights and modernity to contextualize the complex space in which the women participants of this study negotiated their gendered subjectivity as educated women. Then I employ ethnographic data to explore how the women participants approached wisdom to both embody and contest the modern gendered subjectivity guiding the women's education project in Pakistan.

Women's Education and the Narratives of Modernity and Progress in Pakistan

Nicholas Kristof's *New York Times* article on Pakistan entitled "A Girl, a School, and Hope" (2010) was accompanied by a picture of a smiling girl wearing a school uniform. The girl, Zahida Sardar, is from a small town in Punjab. She enrolled in a private school after convincing her poor, illiterate parents of the importance of quality education, even though they could hardly afford the fees. Because of Zahida's relentless ambition to acquire quality education, Kristoff sees her as a ray of hope in a country marred by poverty, feudalism, corruption, and religious extremism. Kristoff's characterization of women's education as a cure for all ills is not unique. The PBS documentary *Behind Taliban Lines* (Quraishi 2010) connects women's education to eradicating religious extremism by juxtaposing images of young Pakistani girls in a rural school with those of Taliban training camps. In Pakistan, the national and provincial budget allocation to education, and specifically to women's education, increased manifold with the help of assistance from international development agencies and Western states in the wake of the war on terrorism. If education for Pakistani women is viewed as a magic wand, it is no surprise that the international community is willing to protect this wand with monetary, political, and military investments.

Pakistani Women in a Transnational Women's Education Project

This article emerged from a larger study that examined the concepts and practices of quality education and gender empowerment in a transnational and women-centered development organization that I called Institute for Education and Literacy (IEL, a pseud-

onym). The study was based on 16 months of ethnographic research conducted with IEL, which was founded and managed by a group of Pakistani American women living in the United States. IEL established, supported, and managed more than one hundred elementary, secondary, and high schools for girls from low-income communities across Pakistan. IEL also recruited teachers from local communities and provided them extensive subject-based and pedagogical training. This article primarily draws on semistructured interview data and observations of these teachers. In addition, it also employs ethnographic data, comprising in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, that were collected with the IEL's staff and policymakers as part of a larger study to describe the institutional context in which these women teachers negotiated and enacted their educated subjectivities.

In the larger study, I asked how the philosophy and structure of this women-centered organization as well as the diasporic connections of its founders and policymakers shaped the notion of education for women from low-income communities in Pakistan. IEL focused on what they called "quality education" as the central component of their mission. Quality education included the development of English language skills, concept-based knowledge, and inquisitive thinking. The idea of "culture as capital" was central to IEL's vision of quality education as it aimed to transfer middle-class cultural capital to women teachers and students from low-income communities. It approached middle-class capital as specific modes of interactions, mannerisms, and English literacy skills in addition to academic mastery. IEL argued that its vision of quality education empowered women from low-income communities by helping them acquire both the academic knowledge and cultural tools needed for upward economic and social mobility in Pakistan. Farzana (pseudonym), the CEO and founder of the organization expressed this philosophy explicitly:

We want to reach the full potential of our students and teachers. It is a gradual process, an incremental change, but we have to be patient. For example, our teachers have to unlearn so much before learning new things such as speaking correct English, how to dress up, how to present themselves. But they are phenomenal women. You know getting jobs is important . . . but it is also important (for women) to develop in other ways, to be able to give back to the family and the community. You know how it is in Pakistan. You cannot go too far if you speak English with a particular accent (reference to the localized accent). It will take time but we are focusing on their real success.

The "real" success to which Farzana referred was not found only in academics but also in particular ways of being in the world, a performed subjectivity that reflected middle-class academic and cultural capital.

IEL's vision of quality education and gender empowerment differed from the gender-and-development mainstream in two key ways. First, in contrast to the international development agencies that focused solely on the economic mobility of women from marginalized communities in Pakistan, IEL aimed to support the social as well as economic mobility of the teachers, students, and communities as a whole. The international development agencies used statistics about the absolute number of girl students enrolled and retained over time as their indicator of success. Their underlying philosophy was that educated women would be able to acquire employment outside the home, which would eventually lead to their individual economic independence and empowerment. IEL, however, worked with fewer communities. Instead of trying to provide education to as many women as possible, IEL spent its funds to provide facilities, such as libraries, computer labs, and extracurricular activities, which it associated with middle-class education. Second, in contrast to the international development agencies that focused on empowerment of "individual" women, IEL envisioned gender empowerment in terms of the progress of women, families, and communities together.

IEL's distinctive approach to quality education and gender empowerment was made possible through its organizational structure and membership. The founder and policy-makers of IEL were professional Pakistani American women driven by their desire to give back to the community. Most were born in Pakistan, so their experiences of growing up as middle class and receiving quality education in Pakistan that ensured their economic and social success after their migration to the United States was central to their vision of education. They viewed their upward mobility as well as their desire to do something for Pakistan as a product of the education that prepared them as global citizens. These women policymakers believed that education should offer the same service to the women teachers and students from marginalized communities, even if they lacked economic and social resources. The concept of "quality education" thus combined academic learning in the classroom with access to facilities such as libraries and computer labs, and with middle-class ways of being such as English literacy skills and confident modes of interaction.

The flexibility and experimentation inherent in this view of "quality education" was also supported by the funding structure of IEL. IEL policymakers were apprehensive about the agendas and conditions often attached to the funds made available by the large development organizations or Western states. As a result, they sought funding primarily from the Pakistani diaspora living in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom. These donors were often professionals who trusted IEL and provided funds without conditions about the specific nature of pedagogy or content of instruction. In short, IEL as an institution provided a context to the local actors, who were exposed to a wide range of global discourses on womanhood and modernity through media, state, and other international development agencies, to draw actively from indigenous resources to construct their modern subjectivity. In other research, I compare IEL with other development organizations. This article focuses on the experiences of these local actors to understand how such global discourses get (dis)assembled in local contexts.

Education as Wisdom

I argue that women teachers, recruited and trained by IEL to work at the IEL's community schools, constructed and performed their subjectivity as modern and educated women in a context shaped by indigenous values. In particular, these women teachers stressed the importance of wisdom and approached wisdom as the ability and virtue of educated people to make decisions informed by knowledge about right and wrong. I analyze how the enactment of wisdom as an expression of individual rights and family honor together highlighted the discursive process of gendered subject-formation. I take up the concept of "wisdom" as a lens to view the construction of such modern and educated subjectivity for three main reasons. First, the teachers themselves frequently used the term *samajdhar* (wise) to refer to educated people. I examine how they used the term to express their awareness of the complex and often contested demands placed on them as the agents of change as well as to describe the acumen needed to effectively negotiate such demands. Second, IEL mobilized this same understanding of wisdom, even though its policymakers and staff did not always use the term. The organization encouraged the perception that educated women were not only strong individuals but also productive members of their families and communities. This vision was not one of liberating individual women from their oppressive local culture but, rather, operated to support women's education in close collaboration with local communities. Third, the term *wisdom* as the teachers used it also alluded to a particular perception of women's education embedded in the history of Islamic reformism in South Asia. The Islamic reformist movement presented modern education for Muslim women as the prerequisite for reforming Muslim families and communities. Movement leaders argued that modern education equipped Muslim

women with the knowledge and skills to make “wise decisions” about their families and communities. Education as wisdom, thus, had a cultural resonance as the women participants approached education and modernity as Islamic heritage rather than Western practices. Later in the article, I elaborate further on this third argument by employing the example of a popular novel to explain how the idea of modern and educated Muslim women as productive members of the society existed in popular perception in Pakistan before the recent international focus on women's education.

Methods and Participants

IEL had established a country office in Islamabad, with a staff of 30–35 people, to support and manage over a hundred community schools to serve low-income communities in different regions of Pakistan. I collected data at the country office in Islamabad, nine IEL community schools from different regions, and at the offices of two local organizations working in partnership with the IEL to support community schools. The data constituted in-depth interviews with the founder, executive director and staff of IEL, staff of the local partner organizations, teachers recruited and trained by IEL to work at the IEL's community schools, and community members who were part of the committees that worked with IEL to establish, maintain, and run schools serving different communities. I also interviewed family members of six teachers including the ones interviewed for this article. In sum, I interviewed 22 teachers working for IEL community schools, 12 IEL staff members, four staff members of the two local partner organizations, and five members of the committees acting as liaison between IEL and local communities. More than half of the interviews were conducted in two to three sessions with each session ranging from one to two hours. The rest of the interviews were conducted in a single session that lasted for one to three hours. I conducted participant-observations at multiple sites including classrooms at community schools, teacher meetings, parent-teacher meetings, meetings between teachers and IEL staff, teacher trainings, policy and planning meetings at the Islamabad office, and meetings between the IEL staff and the community members.

The teachers were recruited from IEL community schools situated in different geographical regions of Pakistan. Schools were chosen based on their accessibility to Islamabad, where I lived during the data collection period. After visiting a number of IEL community schools during the first phase of the study, I decided to focus extensively on two schools to develop an in-depth analysis of the teachers, schools, and related communities. After building relationships with the teachers, I invited all the teachers working at these two schools, as well as teachers who were available during my visits to the other schools, to participate in in-depth interviews and allow me to observe their classrooms. In addition, I also interviewed some teachers who participated in IEL's teacher training sessions. All the individuals I contacted agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, and were later transcribed and translated into English. Both inductive and deductive coding methods were used to code for relevant themes (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The two main inductive codes that I employed in the initial coding phase were for the meaning and value of education for women. They revealed that the participants defined *education* as the ability to negotiate between multiple responsibilities and to distinguish between right and wrong. Within this broader theme, the subthemes of women's rights and family honor emerged as constituting wisdom. I then contacted some of the women teachers again, including the ones interviewed for this article, to discuss in greater depth their views about education, women's rights, family honor, and wisdom. I interacted with these participants at multiple sites: their classrooms, formal and informal settings with other teachers, teacher training

sessions, meetings with the IEL staff, and, in some cases, their homes. These observations contextualize the process by which these teachers constructed their identities as educated Muslim women.

Here, I primarily focus on the interviews with three teachers, Salma, Rabia, and Safia (pseudonyms), for their rich descriptions and insights into the issues of human rights and education. These three participants were especially articulate in describing how wisdom should be understood as the central component of education for women and in sharing how they were the first women in their families and communities to acquire education. Although their formulations were striking, they were by no means unusual in how they spoke about education's role in shaping their identities and actions as teachers and members of their families. Education as wisdom, with a particular focus on joining individual rights and family honor, came up frequently in my formal interviews and informal conversations with women teachers; however, I chose to focus on these three participants to adequately contextualize their experiences. I interviewed and observed these three participants in multiple settings. I also visited their homes and spent time with their immediate and extended families. Thus, not only their articulateness but also the depth of information I have about them makes them excellent cases for in-depth discussion of themes I observed more generally; by keeping the number small, I can present more detail about each one to convey the context in which education is being interpreted.

Salma, a 30-year-old woman, had a junior college degree (two years of college). She had been working for four years as the principal of a rural community school supported and managed by IEL. This school served a village with poor access to services such as electricity, running water, and health care because of its geographical location. Salma was the first, and still one of very few women, in her village to earn a high school and college degree. The community's literacy rate was very low, and community members relied primarily on agriculture to support themselves. Salma was married to her cousin (the son of her father's brother; cousin marriages are common and often preferred in Pakistani Muslim society) and had a two-year-old son. According to the IEL staff-members, who had recruited and trained Salma, she was one of their most vocal and assertive teachers. Salma took pride in this image and attributed her confidence to her exposure to city life as well as to her parents' encouragement. Before moving back to the village approximately five years ago, Salma lived in a major city in Pakistan where her father held a government job. Her father was the first person in the village to receive a high school education and also the first person to leave the village to live in a city.

Rabia, a 32-year-old woman, had a bachelor's degree in education. She worked as an elementary school teacher in another community school supported and managed by IEL to serve a low-income community; however, compared to Salma's community, this community had far better access to electricity, running water, health care, education, and transportation, and was also closer to cities. The members of the community relied on agriculture and held jobs in major cities. The adult literacy rate was low, but almost all children under the age of 14 or 15 attended school. Rabia was the first woman in her community to attend high school and college; the number of girls attending high school and college increased significantly after she graduated. Rabia was also married to her cousin; she had a six-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son. Rabia was recruited and trained as a teacher by IEL around five years ago, although she had also worked as a teacher with another development agency in the past.

Safia, a 29-year-old woman, held a bachelor's degree in education. She was the principal of an IEL community school serving another very low-income and rather inaccessible village. Safia was one of the first women in her family and community to attend school. The village she worked in had very few educated women. The adult literacy rate

was very low in that village, but a large number of younger children had started attending school. Safia was also married to her cousin; she had a one-year-old son. She lived in a nearby village that had better access to the city than the school village. Like Salma, Safia grew up in a large city where her father had a government job until the family returned to one of the nearby towns when her father retired. She had worked as a teacher at a private school in a nearby town before she was hired and trained by IEL to work for this community.

Performance of Gender, Education, Modernity, and Wisdom

Wisdom as the defining trait of educated people, especially of women, frequently came up in the interviews and conversations with the teachers. These women defined *wisdom* as the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, whether related to education, employment, marriage, and family disputes, or to mannerisms and daily behavior. To conceptualize their gendered identities, I draw on Butler (1997, 1999), who argues that subjects are socially constructed through iterative and repetitive performances. She conceptualizes these performances as public rituals, and not a singular act, and as constituting identity rather than expressing a given, stable, and private identity. Drawing on Foucault's (1978) conceptualization of subject formation as subjects-in-being and always in the process of formation, Butler focuses on practices and techniques that construct a particular self. She argues that gender attributes and acts are performative and cannot be measured by a preexisting identity (1999).

The conceptualization of gender as performative is particularly useful as a means to examine how multiple discourses, local and global, shape the gendered subjectivities of these teachers. First, performativity provides a lens to analyze the complex identities and life experiences of the women teachers, instead of viewing them as a mere reflection of either local traditions or Western modernity. These identities simultaneously embrace and contest both local and global discourses in a hybrid manner. For instance, the participants approached gender empowerment as securing their individual rights but also as building strong relationships with their families and communities.

Also drawing on Butler (1997, 1999), who proposes that power cannot be solely understood on the model of domination and as something possessed and deployed by sovereign agents over others, I argue that the practice of wisdom as a virtue of educated women negates the binary of power and resistance. These women teachers as subjects do not exist outside the regulatory discourses of international development agencies or of their local culture. Their subjectivity as educated women, even when they contest these discourses, is still fundamentally enabled by the availability of these discourses.

The performativity framework is also helpful to explore how the teachers claimed empowerment as members of their families and communities. For Butler (1999), specific material conditions make certain identities possible and livable while making other identities impossible. She states that not everything is structured but, rather, everything is dependent on structures: linguistic, institutional, and political structures that are cited and recited in any specific case. As some of the first women in their communities to acquire education, these teachers faced fierce opposition from community members but received support from their immediate families, in most cases, particularly their fathers. They and their family members employed Islam and the history of Islamic modernity in South Asia, a discourse that was intelligible and valuable in their local contexts, to justify the need to educate women. The material conditions to perform education as wisdom were also provided by IEL's unique model of quality education and gender empowerment that provided space to the women participants of this study to actively draw from local resources to construct their modern subjectivity. I employ the performativity framework

to explore how the women teachers used the notion of wisdom to assemble their gendered educated subjectivity at the nexus of local and global discourses on gender, education, and modernity.

Nation-Building via Women's Education: Waving the Magic Wand

In mainstream gender-and-development and media discourses, Muslim women are positioned as both victims and agents of change and reform. Abu-Lughod (1998) contends that in Muslim societies "the woman question" is at the heart of nation-making projects and engagement between the "East" and the "West." Muslim women have become an essential aspect of contemporary modernization projects that seek to redefine women's rights, clothing, and roles (Ahmed 1992; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Jamal 2009; Kandiyoti 2007; Mahmood 2005). This agent-victim subjectivity is premised on a universal and monolithic construction of Muslim woman as well as of human rights (Abu-Lughod 2002; Hesford and Kozol 2005; Jamal 2009). In these narratives, empowerment for women is envisioned as the capacity to realize one's own interest against the weight of customs and traditions and, thus, move from tradition to modernity (Ahmed 1992; Hesford and Kozol 2005; Kandiyoti 2007). Popular media and policy discourses focus on two particular sites, freedom in marital choice and practice of family honor, to explore and report on the status of women in Muslim communities, whether living in Muslim countries or in the West. These discourses portray arranged marriages (marriages arranged for women by their families) and family honor as violating Muslim women rights and inscribing traditional hierarchies that deny women choices.

Choice in Marriage: Family versus Self

Abu-Lughod (1998) describes the contentious debate about women's choice in marriage as a struggle between ideologies perceived to be traditional and modern in Muslim countries. She examines a fictional woman character in a 1959 Egyptian novel who seeks empowerment through a love marriage. The novel portrays love marriage, as opposed to arranged marriage, as an embodiment of progress and modernity. Western popular and policy discourses echo the same idea by using "arranged marriages" to express the lack of choice for Muslim women confined in oppressive patriarchal societies and using "love marriages" to confirm women's awareness of, and struggle for, their rights.

In Pakistan, human rights groups have taken up a number of high-profile legal cases to support women who married against their families' wishes (see Jahangir and Jilani 2003). International media and policymakers employ these cases to evaluate the modernization of the social, legal, and political institutions of Pakistan. Karin Carmit Yefet (2009) draws on a woman's right to choose a spouse to examine the Pakistani constitution. She mobilizes various dichotomies such as human rights versus local traditions and Islamic versus Western law to examine Pakistani legal institutions through the lens of women's marital choice. Regarding the empowerment of Muslim women, therefore, the issue of choice in marriage is seen as central to the validation or violation of women's rights.

Family Honor and Women's Empowerment

Popular media and policy discourses in the West also associate honor in Muslim societies with violence against women, with honor killings being the defining type. *Honor killing* is a generic term used to refer to the murder of women by immediate family members because of an allegation, suspicion, or proof of sexual impropriety by the victim (Ahmed 1999). Until the early 1980s, a subarea of anthropology produced research on

Muslim societies that examined the gendered social construction of honor as a male trait and shame as a female trait (see Gilmore 1987; Herzfeld 1980; Peristiany 1966). According to Gilmore (1987), it was in the 1960s that Julian Pitt-Rivers and Jean Peristiany developed the idea of a Mediterranean "culture area," which had a uniform value system based on codes of honor and shame. Gilmore further argued that the practices of honor–shame, which reflected the guardian role of men and chastity of women, were integral to the organization of these societies. Ewing (2008), in her book on Turkish immigrants in Germany, contends that casting out Turkish immigrants from German society is embedded in particular portrayals of Islamic tradition, which is associated with protecting male honor through violence against women, and of Western modernity, which is associated with the notions of equality and freedom. These discourses project family honor as oppressive to women and the antithesis of modernity (Sever and Yurdakul 2001). Although women's education projects mobilize this binary of tradition–modernity to position Muslim women as the agents of change, local actors employ localized and historical notions of gender, education, and modernity–tradition to define the meaning and value of education for Muslim women.

Women's Education: The Past and Present of Pakistan

It is unclear when the idea of Muslim women as agents of change entered local discourses in Pakistan; the Muslim reformist movement of 19th-century British-ruled India most likely contributed significantly to a shift in the subjectivity of women from a threat to the society to agents of change (Metcalf 1990; Minault 1998). The leaders of the movement, who were *ulema* (scholars of Islamic sciences) from the professional middle class, were pioneers in advocating for modern education, introduced in India by the British, for the Muslim women of India. The *ulema* positioned education for women as central to reforming the Muslim community, which faced political, social, and economic decline after the British colonized India in the 19th century (Metcalf 1990; Minault 1998; Robinson 2008; Sikand 2006). Given the intense international focus on Muslim women and education for Muslim women, I describe this context to examine how it became possible for the women participants of this study to approach modern education for Muslim women as an Islamic heritage rather than an import from the West.

For the *ulema*, the reference for developing modernity was exclusively Islamic texts and history and did not include Western ideas (Robinson 2008). This frame of reference also shaped the discourse around women's education in the face of opposition from within the Muslim community. Arguing for the formal schooling of Muslim women implied a shift in the centuries-old local tradition of the home as the center of women's interests, education, and mobility. The *ulema* characterized these beliefs as irrational and un-Islamic, and employed Islamic texts to present modern education as not only the right of Muslim women, but also as central to the progress of Muslim society. They quoted *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) such as "Seeking knowledge is the duty of every Muslim man and woman" and "Seek knowledge even if you have to go to China" to support their arguments. Muslims were called on to seek modern education and science as part of their religious and social duty and to resurrect their lost glory (Minault 1998).

This approach affirmed education as the right and religious duty of every Muslim woman, as well as being central to women's empowerment; it also prescribed particular sites for the performance of those rights and empowerment. For instance, the right of Muslim women to acquire education was to be performed by using modern knowledge and skills to strengthen families and community. Education was to be used to bring honor to the family rather than to assert individuality or subvert Islamic norms. This reformist discourse also shaped the Pakistan independence movement of the 20th century that

demanded a separate state for Muslims and was embodied in nation-building efforts in Pakistan, where women's education has been a central goal of the Ministry of Education since its inception in 1947. This national imagery provided the tools teachers used to engage with women's education as part of their culture and history rather than as a Western construct and practice.

Miraat-ul-Uroos: Reformist Narrative of Women's Education, Wisdom, and Family Honor

In Pakistan, the indigenous narrative that presents education as something that transforms people into better individuals, family members, citizens, and Muslims circulates in different forms of popular culture, in addition to the official discourse. An important site for this theme is Urdu publications with stories of women written by women about family, love, marriage, and joint-family systems. These publications, called women's magazines, also originated with the rise of the Islamic reformist movement of the 19th century. The educated wives and daughters of the leaders of the movement took it on themselves to invite and publish stories of Muslim women as a way to create a community of women and to learn from each other's experiences. While discussing everyday issues that women faced, these publications strongly emphasized the importance of education for Muslim women to resolve issues inside and outside their homes (Minault 1998). In contemporary Pakistan, similar women's magazines continue to be widely popular among women from across class and rural-urban backgrounds. The stories written by women glorify "wise and sensible" characters: women who successfully navigate the challenges of being in love, difficult marriages, unfair in-laws, and motherhood and career, among others. In these narratives, the role of education is presented as something that prepares women to challenge outdated and un-Islamic traditions and, yet, support the cohesion of their families.

The inscription of wisdom in the educated subjectivity of Muslim women and its performance in daily life is depicted accurately and thoroughly in what is considered the first, and one of the most popular, Urdu novels. This novel demonstrates the indigenous cultural frameworks that the women participants drew on as they discussed their subjectivity as modern and educated Muslim women in contemporary times. Nazeer Ahmed's *Miraat-ul-Uroos* (*The Bride's Mirror*) was written for and about the Muslim women of 19th-century colonial India. This novel was published in 1869 and has not been out of print since then. It is part of the K-10 Urdu curriculum in Pakistan and was also adapted into a popular TV drama series. The novel tells the story of two sisters married to brothers who live in a joint-family system with their in-laws. Akbari, the older sister, is presented as impulsive, stubborn, and irrational. She is careless with money, uninterested in education, and cavalier about the middle-class etiquette of living in a joint-family system. Asghari, the younger sister, embodies the opposite characteristics: she is wise, reasonable, and educated. She fulfills her responsibilities as a wife and daughter-in-law and values family traditions but also educates the family about scientific household management by systematizing the family's finances. Akbari is not only uninterested but also ill-equipped to handle the family and community projects that Asghari manages with ease. Since childhood, Asghari has been keenly interested in formal education, acquiring literacy in different languages as well as studying science and mathematics. She manages household expenses wisely by discouraging irrational and un-Islamic traditional practices. By contrast, Akbari refuses to change her uneducated ways and continues to add to the financial and social problems of the family.

The characters of Akbari and Asghari in this popular novel serve as a powerful commentary on the concept of an "ideal" woman that emerged from the Muslim reformist movement. The contrast between the two suggests that family can be valued even as its practices are modernized by scientific knowledge. In fact, the *Miraat-ul-Uroos* sequel titled

Banat-un-Nash (*Constellation of the Stars*, 1873) depicts Asghari running a girls' school in her community. This indigenous discourse, as portrayed in these novels, positions education as the right of women but reframes rights not as an escape from the family into individual achievement or personal freedom, but as an opportunity to contribute to the work of modernizing the family. Family honor, thus, is inscribed in the performance of educated subjectivity and is not viewed as a force curtailing women's empowerment.

Education, Rights, and Honor: The Project of Women's Education in Pakistan

Educated women become aware of their worth. You know why some people are against women's education? It is because educated women start raising their voice[s] . . . they start fighting for their rights . . . that is alarming for many people. Education enables you to distinguish between right and wrong . . . we start thinking, start looking at things in a different way and want to improve them. We start questioning and asking "why" and "how" . . . (This is) why and how (education) becomes the catalyst for change.

In this excerpt, Salma discussed the most significant advantage of education for women. She connected women's education to two outcomes: first, knowledge about the difference between right and wrong, and, second, the capacity for women to act on that knowledge by raising their voices and fighting for their rights. This narrative of women's education as a source of the knowledge and means to practice rights was a theme raised in interviews with all the women teachers. Their accounts seemed to confirm the modernist discourse that guided the educational reforms and shaped educational pedagogy and curriculum, aiming to empower women as part of the efforts to modernize Pakistan.

However, the hybridity of their accounts of education, women's rights, and empowerment became visible in the performance of these rights. The participants spoke about how education enabled them to perform new roles, such as representing their communities to the state and to international institutions working on development projects in their communities in a way that aligned with their cultural values. International development agencies, including IEL, encouraged women from communities perceived as marginalized to take up leadership positions in development projects as well as in negotiations with state functionaries. By drawing on this discourse, while recognizing the newness of their roles, the teachers emphasized how education enabled them to appreciate and support the essence of their cultural knowledge instead of subverting it.

In the participants' narratives, the notion and practice of human rights hinged on their ability to identify what they believed to be unfair practices and speak out against them. The women used a wide range of examples to illustrate the meaning of practicing rights; for example, as educated women, they did not allow their husbands or mothers-in-law to shop for them, unlike other women in their villages who were not educated. What to wear or consume was seen as a woman's rightful choice. Another site to practice rights was decisions regarding their employment as teachers, which implied working outside the home. Women like Salma and Rabia had to face fierce opposition from their husbands and in-laws when they decided to work as teachers. Rabia explained,

An educated person is aware of the difference between right and wrong. An educated woman speaks up because she knows what her rights are . . . her rights as a woman . . . as a Muslim. I see it at our school—mothers who are not educated never visit to inquire about their children. It is often the grandmothers. Now what do the grandmothers know? That is the difference; educated women are able to make decisions for themselves. They cannot be silenced or pushed aside easily.

The female participants distinguished their struggles from the “petty” conflicts in which illiterate women engaged. Salma said:

I see women from my village fighting and cursing over things such as whose cattle entered into whose fields. Now this can be resolved very easily if they communicate with each other and make some permanent arrangements. But, no, they will fight and curse the whole day just to prove their point.

The teachers believed that their struggles were valid and worthwhile as they aimed to transform families and communities, instead of focusing on temporary or personal gratification. Speaking up for one’s rights in the face of opposition was a trait of an educated woman, and, in contrast to emotional outbursts, was informed by careful deliberation.

Education and Choice in Marriage

Teachers positioned the act of speaking up as a manifestation of their awareness of their rights as educated women but confined their performance of rights to particular sites and issues. For instance, the teachers defined marital choice as an irrelevant site for practicing rights. Following local customs, most of the participants’ marriages had been arranged by their families. Despite connecting their education to the awareness and practice of their rights, the teachers’ narratives did not reflect Western discourses about love versus arranged marriages. Salma and her sister’s marriages (to two brothers who lived in the village) were arranged by their parents, and Salma, who saw herself as a strong and assertive woman, did not feel that her marriage in any way negated that self-image:

My sister and I grew up in the city and did not want to live in the village, but the situation was kind of complicated. You see my father is a very well-respected man in our community because of his wisdom and education. He had given his word. Our mother helped us understand the situation and what it meant for our family’s reputation. So we gave our consent but with a condition that our parents would also move back to the village with us. Now they live right next to us. They even sold their house in the city and moved my younger siblings to the village. They have done a lot for us.

Salma spoke of her marriage in terms of her relationship with her family and stressed the support and encouragement she received from them, not constraints. Despite her discomfort with the idea of living in the village, she did not describe her arranged marriage as a violation of her rights. Safia, who was married to her cousin by her parents’ arrangement, spoke candidly about the fact that her husband was nine years older than her and that did not bother her. Safia remarked:

We do not marry outside [our] community; our families arrange our marriages. At times men get to choose who they want to marry, but not women. But our [women’s] minds are made up right from the start. We have not had any problems so far . . . no one has said no.

Safia, who commuted a long distance every day to teach at her school and saw herself as a reformer in the community, did not relate women’s empowerment to marital choice. Like Salma, her lens for understanding this issue was the relationship of affection and trust with her parents, not individual rights:

Our parents have been so good to us, they listen to us, have given us everything and never asked for anything in return. They have made good decisions for us, decisions about marriage, education. . . . My [extended] family is seen as an example in the village. We are the first ones to go to school, to college, to work as teachers. My elder sister was the first woman in our community to attend college. My father used to say, “My daughters [will] set an example for others,” and we did that, we upheld our family’s name through our values and virtue.

Safia spoke of her father's struggle to send his daughters to college as evidence of his ability to make good decisions, including choosing a spouse, for his children. Similarly, Salma, despite a turbulent marriage, did not regret accepting her parents' decision. The teachers in general spoke of their arranged marriages as an embodiment of the strength of family ties instead of lack of choice. In this context, marriage was not the site that either validated or violated their rights. The sense of empowerment provided by their ability to become useful members of the family and community was built on strong family ties. In the teachers' view, it was their education and the wisdom it provided that enabled them to appreciate this empowerment and to value their families.

Education and Family Honor

My elder sister [the first woman in the community to attend college] had to wait at a bus stop to commute to her college in a nearby city. People would make nasty comments as she waited for the bus; they were not used to seeing a woman there. My brothers would get really upset about it. But my father said "Tomorrow others [will] send their daughters to school because of what my daughters are doing today." And that is what happened. No one could ever point their finger at us.

Safia told this story with pride; she suggested that she and her sisters brought honor to their family through their honorable characters. They thought of their travel to school and college as a journey in which they upheld family honor by ensuring that they were careful at each step they took outside their homes. Family honor, in this narrative, ties expectations of proper conduct to women's unguarded sexuality. Women traveling long distances unaccompanied by male family members were viewed as endangering family honor by possibly having pre- or extramarital relationships. However, teachers spoke proudly of how they upheld their family's name by embodying honorable conduct even in the face of harassment. At a time when it was not common for women to go outside the village, the teachers had regularly waited at bus stops or walked long distances to attend high school and college. They spoke of those commutes, and the opposition they and their families had faced, in terms of their own and their students' journey to education, enlightenment, and empowerment. Salma said,

My life has not been easy, but it would not have been different from the other women in the village had I not been educated. I would have had to put up with whatever was given to me. It's not that I do not work hard now but at least my work is appreciated. People respect me.

The notion of honor in these narratives, however, extends beyond proper sexual conduct to a broader performance of educated selves. Family honor, just like the practice of women's rights, was premised on the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and was informed by wisdom, not only in regard to sexual conduct, but in all areas of life. For instance, Safia described her work for the community as her family's triumph over people who talked about her and her sisters attending college. She recounted,

We thought of our father, our parents, every time we made a decision [while commuting to school and college]. Our family is very well-respected in the village. It is my family who has donated land to build this school, there is no other school in this village. I could have lived in a much better place, closer to the city, but I commute every day to this village to teach. There are no educated women in this village. I visit families to ask them to send their children to school. Boys can still go to schools in nearby villages, but not girls. People start talking if they commute on public transport and come back home late. But today I can come here for girls.

The women participants believed they sustained the honor of their families by making education available to the children of the community. The women participants felt proud

that their families were known because of them and their work as teachers. Rabia discussed how her journey to education was a reflection of what it meant to be honorable, beginning with a description of the hardships she faced while attending school:

I wanted to quit school. I was the first woman in my community to go to school and then to college. I felt so ashamed when I saw my name written all over the walls of my school. I had done nothing wrong but still felt that I had maligned my family's name.

Rabia continued her story, explaining how her education became important to her father, why he was so determined for her to continue her schooling, and, finally, the honor education eventually brought to her family:

My father's story is interesting. He was never that much interested in educating his children. My elder sisters never went to school and though my brothers were in school, he would make them work in the fields. There was this one incident that completely changed his views on education. My father visited my brother's school to socialize with the teachers who were also his friends. . . . As my father entered the school, all the teachers came running to congratulate him because my brother had received a 100 percent result in mathematics. My father was so surprised and touched by this reception. He never thought that education could bring him so much respect. After that, he decided that he would educate his children. My sisters were too old to go to school but I was still young. My own uncles said nasty things about me going to a boys' school. There was no girls' school in our village at that time. But my father was a very strong person and did not care about what people said. Today the same brother and uncles who opposed my education come to me to help their children with studies. People respect me wherever I go because I am a teacher; they say my father's name with respect because I teach their children.

Rabia's narrative reflects a deeply held social and cultural belief about the honor and wisdom of being educated. The complexity of the notion and practice of honor was demonstrated well in her case. On the one hand, she felt responsible for protecting her family's honor through her conduct as the first woman to travel to school and college. On the other hand, it was the very construct of honor in her social and cultural setting that made it possible for her to receive an education and work as a teacher.

The construct of family honor thus was available to empower women from rural and low-income communities, even if not typically used in this way. The teachers mobilized the cultural understanding of teaching as the work of prophets to explain how their work brought honor to their families. Safia shared, "Our prophet (Mohammad) was a teacher. The first verse of Quran revealed to him asked him to learn and teach. We are his followers." Because of their education, the teachers saw themselves as models for young girls in the community. Salma explained,

I tell my students and their parents to look at me as an example. I tell parents that their daughters could be like me. I tell girls that I did not take much interest in studies when I was young but whatever I am today, it is because of education. People respect me. I got this job because people [organization staff and community members] thought that I was able to do something. Students come to me for advice. I tell them that my progress in life has translated into such valuable opportunities for them too. There are no teachers available in this area. Who would have taken care of this school, had I not been educated? I can see some light in darkness; I lit one candle and, with the blessing of Allah, there are so many more now.

Salma's description of herself as a model for the community rested not only on her educational credentials, but also her wisdom and honorable character. She saw her decision to work as a teacher against the wishes of her husband and in-laws as an assertion of her rights. She nonetheless embraced the decision of her parents to arrange her marriage as an embodiment of family honor. She, like other teachers, described these decisions, and the knowledge to make them, as embodying wisdom that they acquired from education.

As they understood educated womanhood, the conversation around rights reflected an individualist sensibility, the need to follow the honor code evinced a sense of collective belonging.

Education: Wisdom

Look at my marriage, that's an example [of wisdom gained from education]. Today my marriage is intact only because I learned something from education. I would have returned to my parents' home a long time ago, had I not learned how to deal with the situation. My husband and in-laws did not want me to work at the school; they did not see any use in it. I used to have fights with my husband every day about this topic, but I refused to give in. It was my right to make that decision [to work as a teacher]. But I also knew when and where to stop, how to deal with it wisely, I knew what the situation was. I never raised my voice, never fought and cursed like an illiterate woman. I was always respectful of my in-laws and at the same time was firm about my decision. Now they are happy that I am making money and everyone respects me. I would have been divorced, had I not been educated.

Salma echoed the view commonly expressed by the teachers that wisdom was not just formal knowledge but the ability to live in a productive and useful manner. By invoking individual rights wisely, Salma simultaneously reflected and contested the image of a modern educated woman. The participants believed that what set them apart from "uneducated" women was not only claiming rights but doing so in a way that supported family cohesion. This construction closely resembles the Pakistani story of the two sisters, Akabri, who was assertive and outspoken but lacked wisdom to put these qualities to good use, and Asghari, who was not only confident but also educated and, thus, able to resolve issues wisely. Rabia referred to such stories in dealing with situations in which she felt that her husband and in-laws acted unfairly toward her. She declared that she would have left her husband long ago had she not learned about the consequences of such a decision from these stories.

It was wisdom that guided women's decisions to speak out against what they believed to be unfair, such as opposition to their employment outside home. It was also wisdom that helped them to at times accept decisions and situations with which they were initially unhappy. This acceptance affirmed a greater value in family and community ties. The notion of honor was not only informed by social and religious codes imposed on them but also included the wisdom to actively negotiate multiple demands. Their performance of preserving and transforming tradition in the face of changing times echoed the character of Asghari in the novel *Miraat-ul-Uroos*, whose wisdom and education helped the family to maintain their respected social status as they coped with the economic and political decline of Muslims in British-ruled India.

Conclusion

The narratives of women teachers provide a lens through which to examine the underlying beliefs, negotiations, attitudes, and dispositions in the construction and performance of their gendered educated subjectivity. As Pakistan takes center stage in the fight against global terrorism, the media and policy narratives reinscribe the "woman question" (Abu-Lughod 1998) as central to the efforts to modernize Pakistan. Development projects in countries such as Pakistan lead efforts to restructure family, community, and nation by mobilizing modernist discourses about womanhood that pit human rights against tradition (Abu-Lughod 2009; Grewal 2005). The international educational reforms guiding the contemporary women's education project in Pakistan position women as agents of change who can modernize the society. However, the participants in this study saw themselves as

agents of knowledge, not necessarily as agents of change, and they sometimes reshaped, sometimes replaced, and sometimes embraced the practice of individual rights. Women like Salma, Rabia, and Safia mobilized the notion of wisdom—the ability to distinguish between right and wrong—to position and explain the value of education and context-specific practices of women’s rights and family honor. For them, the vision of a good life included not only practicing individual rights, but also building and strengthening meaningful relationships with their families, students, and communities.

It was the notion of wisdom that made it possible for the participants to perform an educated subjectivity that included speaking up for their rights when it came to working as a teacher and following cultural traditions when it came to marriage. Rather than presenting these narratives as evidence of either resistance or submission to Western “colonial” epistemology and/or local “patriarchal” structure, I employed Butler’s (1997, 1999) conceptualization of gender as a socially constructed and performative identity to examine how education enabled these women to bring together local and global discourses to construct their educated subjectivity as one with the wisdom to know when change is needed. Butler’s argument about the significance of material conditions in producing identities provided the lens to see the duality of family honor, which restricted the mobility of the women teachers but simultaneously provided them with the framework to justify the value of education and employment for women from their communities. While this study does not represent all rural women or even women teachers in Pakistan, it uses the teachers’ subjectivity to unpack a discourse of honor and rights that is broadly deployed from above and see how it is mobilized differently from below.

This study has important implications for exploring the global projects and policies that aim to empower women in Muslim countries. The findings highlight the hybridity of the local, which does not always exist in isolation from—or in opposition to—what is seen as global. The local subjectivities of these teachers contribute to the intelligibility of performance of human rights, education, and modernity, which is necessarily contextualized. In the case of this study, the value of education carries social and political histories that construct the field in which people assemble and perform their educated subjectivity. This inscription of the local in the global and vice versa is a means to approach and articulate the construction and performance of gendered educated subjectivities in postcolonial Muslim contexts.

Ayesha Khurshid is a Graduate Student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (akhurshid@wisc.edu).

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