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Exploring the Experiences and Religious Identities of Female Christian Students: A Qualitative Study of a Private Sector University, Lahore

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Abstract

The current study aims to understand the experiences of Christian female students with religious affiliation and identities within the university. It examines the struggles of minority female students in the context of their self-realization and their attempt to survive in a different religious environment. This qualitative research employed six in-depth interviews with respondents chosen through snowball sampling techniques. The data was analyzed through codes and themes. The themes of religious affiliation such as, the foundation of identity and community, religion's influence on social identity and personal values, religious discrimination in educational environments, and the interplay of religious affiliation and academic experiences were explored through the participants' responses. The findings of this research revealed that the university management did not make any inquiry from students about their religion during the admission process. Due to the lack of information about policies regarding Christian Students, they have to experience stereotypical behavior among their fellows. The results of the study indicated that female Christian students faced multi-level of discrimination, first for being a female and second for being a female belonging to a religious minority. This research recommended that the university authorities should investigate especially, the female Christian students about their religious affiliation and keep in mind the demands of female minority students regarding their religion

Keywords: affiliation, Christian, minorities, religion, religious affiliation, students

Introduction

Pakistan is considered as a diverse country where people from diverse cultures, ethnicities, religion, and language live together as one nation. Muslims make up to 95-96% of Pakistan's total population, including 20%

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Shia Muslims and 80% Sunni. On the other hand, the Christian community is the second-largest religious community in Pakistan. Due to their religion, lifestyle, shared cultural norms, and values they have a distinct position in the social structure (Gregory & Valentine, 2009). Practical implementation of the policy regarding the respect of minority rights is still missing. According to the 2021 report of Minority Rights Group International, Pakistan is ranked eighth in the list of countries where minorities are under threat. Christians experience the greatest degree of social, ethnic, and official discrimination and oppression among other minority communities. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to investigate the experiences of religious belongings and affiliations of Christian students and how they face challenges on the basis of their religious differences.

Religious minority is defined as, “a group of people who are minimum in numbers and have a non-dominant position among the majority” (Gregory & Valentine, 2009). The members of a minority group have some common values and beliefs and they have an impression of affiliation with the other group members. They adopt it as their responsibility to secure their linguistic, cultural, and religious norms” (Gregory & Valentine, 2009).

Religion is a socially observable fact throughout human history and exists in all types of societies and cultures. Particularly, it is considered as a social phenomenon because it is followed by human beings collectively in all parts of the world. Religion impacts the ways through which people make sense of everyday life, the world and the opportunity with which individuals share identity with each other. Religion covers the whole compass of human life, right from birth to death. It also supports people and groups in defining the objectives of claiming their existence and the will (Tahir & Tahira, 2016). Anthony Giddens concludes the key elements of religion in these words, “religion is a composition of culture. It comprises values that convert into ritualized practices. It gives a feeling of claiming the end goal and the importance of the group.

Minority and Religious Affiliation

Affiliation is a relationship that is full of emotions and exists in social structure with everlasting social relations. It can be experienced through identification, disconnectedness, embedment, and attachments. Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) gave the details of belonging dimensions such as commonality, attachment, and mutuality. Czarnecka claims that



commonality is a multifaceted phenomenon and defines it as, “Commonality is an experience, value, language, memory building, religion, and way of life”. These are all the factors through which cultural norms are seen. The deeper look at the commonality in context of Christianity, especially in the social structure of Pakistan, the Christian community has their own distinct uniqueness because of their lifestyle, faith, customs, and beliefs. All the above-mentioned elements, distinguish Christians from other Pakistanis. It is clear that religion and ethnicity play a vital role in establishing a person’s ascribed status. It is a reality that a child acquires ethnicity and religion from his/her family right from the birth. The prime function of religion is to provide a sense of affiliation to its followers. Therefore, the Christian community has a strong sense of togetherness and affiliation among themselves as a result of being the minority.

Mutual collaboration (reciprocity) is the second component of belonging that is imposed by shared feelings between the individuals. According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), The ideas of reciprocity apply to one another. Expectations of cooperation and loyalty are attached with the members of the disadvantaged community and they are supposed to pretend sincerity. Particular behavior is expected at their part, that does not negatively impact their existence as a group in society. In Pakistan, people assume that Christians are a second-class citizens so majority groups give them a lower social status, call them derogatory names, and limit their opportunities in all fields of life. In the end, these factors restrict their social conduct and social boundaries. Hence, due to religious intolerance and injustice, the norms of society are not being questioned.

When we set the confines for any group that creates a variation between “us and them” just like insider groups and outsider groups, in both the boundaries, ethnicity and religion play a crucial function. Rahman (2023) stated in his research related to Christianity that because of the pressure from the Muslim majority and their unique and inferior status in the society, Christians have to face discrimination at the socio-economic level in the field of education too, that’s why they are not seen as active citizens in the society.

The third component of belonging is “attachment”. It links humans to places, locations, natural objects, land escapes, and material assets in addition to the material and immaterial aspects. The most important

example of attachment to sites is a church where Christians do their worship and thus, have a deep sense of attachment to this place.

According to the debate of Pfaff-Czraneka (2013) on dimensions of affiliation, multiple groups can be divided into two categories namely, dominant and non-dominant. The majority of the population is comprised of dominant groups, such as the Muslims in Pakistan who have more power and rights as compared to the minorities. On the other hand, minority groups are such groups that are less in population like Christians in Pakistan. These groups have less rights and power as compared to the group of majorities. So, being the non-dominant group, Christians must have to be contended with numerous institutional and personal injustices, including social stigmatization and psychological insecurity.

Purpose of the Study

This study was specifically about a particular population that is Christian females studying in a private sector university in Lahore. The purpose of the current study was to highlight the issues of female minority students within the premises of the university. It is the necessity of time that university students and teachers must be made aware regarding the minority rights. This study also addresses a major query that how Christian female students with their religious belongings survive and face challenges. This research has deep insight to evaluate the influence of campus climate on the interaction of Christian female students with other Muslim fellows.

Significance of the Study

This research significantly highlights the issues of discrimination and otherness faced by the minority students within the campus premises. It helps to develop a nuanced understanding of the challenges and experiences made by female minority students. This research also explores the gap in policy and practice regarding the creation of campus as an inclusive space of learning for the marginalized communities.

Research Questions

1. How do female students with their Christian religious affiliation face issues in the private sector university of Lahore?
2. How does religious affiliation affect female Christian students' choices that are linked to their academic activities?



Literature Review

Extensive literature is available on the experiences and lives of the religious communities. Different scholars highlighted the aspect of religious affiliation and belongingness of minorities as Smith and Denton (2005) examined that teens typically do not totally reject their parents' faith instead; their views shift toward what has been called moralistic therapeutic deism. Teenagers are increasingly adamant about their religious convictions and move away from moralistic therapeutic deism as they become young adults, perhaps giving educational institutions a chance to influence students' spiritual growth in a formative way. According to the suggestion of Astin et al. (2010), for example, many students, in addition to other forms of learning and development, also build their spiritual and religious identity during their post-secondary education. Additionally, research shows that schools and universities are essential to their students' moral growth because they support their desire for purpose.

The contemporary global Christianity is characterized by growing doctrinal and denominational diversity. The rise and decline of different currents and forms of Christian faith are largely shaped by changing dynamics of religious joining, switching (re-affiliation), and quitting (disaffiliation). At the same time, these dynamics reflect broader societal transformations in many parts of the globe. The expansion of mass education, especially among women, is a core feature and engine of these global transformations. In this study, the researchers have connected these two phenomena that is the spread of mass schooling and the diversification of Christianity in order to examine the relationship between women's education and their religious mobility in a typical rural/small-town, predominantly Christian sub-Saharan setting (Agadjanian, 2017).

Majid (2014) explored the intersectionality between minorities and religion in, "Religious Minorities in Pakistan". The author examined in the research that Pakistan being primarily a Muslim country resides many non-Muslim groups. The constitution of Pakistan is in favor of the equality of all citizens regardless of their caste, tribe, language, gender, and religion. Therefore, minorities are free to practice their religion and adhere to their culture (Ahmad & Zafar, 1974). It is observed in the literature that in India, Christians, including nuns and priests, have been harassed and executed cruelly by the gangs of RSS and other aggressive Hindu groups. However, in some parts of Pakistan, it has been observed that Christian minorities

have been treated with honor and patience which depicts the notion of Islamic education. Due to the freedom provided by the Pakistani state, the Christians contribute to the national development. They have run some of the best enlightening establishments and have worked in natural medicinal services focusing on healing facilities. They do maintain themselves in peace and comfort even in situations of violence.

Contrary to this, Mehfooz (2021) analyzed in the study that since ancient times its documented that minorities have been discriminated against and in this victimization, religious minorities are also included. At the time of partition, Muslims were in the majority whereas non-Muslims were in the minority. With time, the ratio of non-Muslims minimized to nearly 3.7% of the total population. The reason for this reduction is that the minority population has to deal with a variety of issues, including forced conversion to Islam and socioeconomic injustice, discrimination in educational institutions, and much more. Anjum and Tariq (2012) examined the important role that Muslims played during Pakistan's independence. It amply demonstrated the critical role that British and Indian Christians played in India's liberation effort. The researchers stated that throughout the partition, Christians stood by Muslims because they believed that despite Islam being the majority in Pakistan, Muslims would uphold minorities' rights and give them a secure place to practice their faith. Christians believed that Pakistani society is expected to be more secular than the caste-ridden society of India.

Personal laws were codified using a particular interpretation of religion and taking into account the knowledge from community leaders and colonial officials. As Chhachhi (1989) stated, before 1941, caste and community customs governed legal matters, nonetheless, the proposed Hindu code reflected the interpretation of Brahmanical interpretation. A Hindu Code Bill was submitted in the Central Legislature in 1943–1944 to regulate Hindu personal matters. A revised draft of the bill was discussed in the Constituent Assembly in 1951 after it was first discussed in the Central Legislature in 1943–1944. Although the initial plan attempted to alter all personal laws, after much opposition, certain elements of it were passed in 1956, guaranteeing women their rights to property, divorce, and so on. However, no changes were made to Muslim or Christian personal laws. The Muslim Personal Law is thought to have been unaltered to comfort the communities who were still healing from the trauma of division.



Walton (2011) evaluated the effects of connection between social belonging, health, and academics on minority students. Through the three years of intervention, researchers looked at the African American pupils' sense of social connection. These students created a socially marginalized subculture in academics. This study showed that while the frequency of visits to doctors decreased, African American students' self-health and general well-being improved as a result of the intervention which also enhanced their academic performance.

There is a confusion to find out the differences regarding the degree to which religion and health are related in men and women. Few researches have examined gender in particular as a potential moderator in the association between spirituality/religiosity and health till date. In statistical analysis, gender is mostly taken into account as a potential founder and controlled variable (Thoresen & Harris, 2002). Therefore, the current study understands the experiences of female Christian students with the perspective of intersectionality. Through “Intersectionality theory” the research analyzed the intersection of religious identity, gender, and other social categories to understand the unique experiences of Christian female students. The main factors of Intersectionality theory are gender, caste, sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability, height, and age but this research mainly focused on the gender and religion. The theoretical framework provides a lens through which the research has examined the complex relationship that exists between gender roles and religious affiliation among female Christian students at the private sector university in Lahore. It enables a thorough investigation of the institutional, societal, and personal elements influencing their experiences. Extensive literature is available on the existence and issues faced by the religious minorities while living in the dominant religious countries but no comprehensive work regarding Christian female’s minority rights found in Pakistani context.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used for the current study as it aims to observe the social components of individuals of a specific given theme where particular approaches are employed to observe people's perceptions and experiences of the world (Given, 2008). The experiences of Christian female students according to their religion under the atmosphere of an educational institution was a broader concept which was undertaken with qualitative research methods. The research employed snowball sampling

technique to select the respondents. From the selected sample, six female Christian students were found as respondents through the snowball sampling. A semi-structured interview guide was developed along with a consent form in which the purpose and benefits of the research were described. The research included all the ethical considerations like confidentiality and anonymity due to the sensitivity of the topic. During the interviews with participants, repetition of views and ideas occurred. At this saturation point, the researcher stopped to conduct further interviews. The data was then gathered from the 6 executed interviews. Thematic analysis technique was used for the analysis of the collected data. A total of four themes were extracted from the data.

Ethical Consideration

The research adhered to the ethical standards of the research. An informed consent form was organized (Halai, 2006) that ensured that participants were respected, and they were not compelled to take part in this study. Through the consent form, the participants were informed that their personal information would not be misused and their identity would not be revealed (Goodwin et al., 2019). As the topic is too sensitive, university and student's names were kept anonymous.

Findings and Analysis

Table 1

Participant's Profile

Participants	Age	Education	Semester
P1	20	B.S Sociology	2 nd
P2	20	B.S Sociology	2 nd
P3	24	B.S I.R	4 th
P4	24	B.S I.R	4 th
P5	26	B.S Education	6 th
P6	26	B.S Special Edu.	6 th

Theme 1. Religious Affiliation as a Foundation of Identity and Community

Affiliation is any group's ownership as shown by its dimensions which include contentedness, identification and attachment. People feel a sense of affiliation when they share customs, relationships, and ideals in the community (Anthias, 2013). Religion is the most crucial part of one's



identity. According to Durkheim's point of view, religion catalyzes human unity and identification in the society. Like the other religious followers, Christian students also admitted religion as a characteristic of their identity that establishes their way of life. Within the university atmosphere, Christian female students feel a strong sense of connection to their church and venues of worship as well as a shared experience with other students in their religious groups. They took great care of their actions so that no one could be affected by their existence in the society.

The 1st Participant described her point of view about the affiliation to religion as:

“Religion is a crucial segment of my life as people in Pakistan distinguish us from our deep belonging with religion. In our daily life dealings, religion guides us in almost every field of life”.

The 2nd Participant said about her religious affiliation in these words:

My religious affiliation serves as a guiding principle for how I conduct myself in the society. It shapes my decisions, behaviors, and interactions with others. I strive to live according to the teachings of Christianity which emphasize love, compassion, and service to others. This means that being mindful of how my actions impact those around me and seeking to positively contribute to the well-being of society.

The 3rd Participant discussed about her religious affiliation as:

In Pakistan, religion holds a significant position in all aspects of society. It serves as a unifying force that provides individuals with a sense of identity, community, and purpose. Religion permeates through various institutions, shapes cultural norms, laws, and social interactions. As a Christian in Pakistan, I am aware of the importance of respecting and honoring the religious beliefs of others, while also upholding my own faith.

To sum up the above theme, the complex interaction between religion and affiliation marks the profound significance of shared customs, relationships, and ideas within a community. As highlighted by Durkheim, religion serves as a catalyst for human unity and identification, permeating through various dimensions of societal life. For Christian students, religion not only shapes their individual identity but also fosters a strong sense of

connection to their faith and community within the university environment. This affiliation extends beyond mere attendance at religious gatherings and encompasses a deep-seated attachment to shared experiences, values, and practices. Within the broader social system, particularly in Pakistan, religion holds a central position in shaping cultural norms, societal institutions, and individual lives. The careful consideration of one's actions in light of religious principles reflects a commitment to upholding the integrity and well-being of the society as a whole. Thus, religion stands as a critical component of the social fabric, anchoring individuals, and communities in a shared sense of purpose and belonging.

Theme 2. Religion's Influence on Social Identity and Personal Values

Religion plays a vital role in the life of a common man because our reaction to sleeping, eating, drinking, waking, and sitting defines our religion. Religion is very important in every individual's life as it defines our way of life. Through observations and practices, the individuals learn the basics of their religion right from the domestic environment. There are many differences between males and females not only physical but mental and emotional too. The roles of males and females are different if women must do domestic work, then men go outside and do hard work for their families. think, in all religions, women stay home and fulfil their family responsibilities instead of doing work outside.

As one of the participants expressed about religion and her social life in these words:

My religion is very important in my life. My family is very religious, they regularly go to church to pray on every Wednesday and Sunday and pray. I also tried my best to practice what is beneficial for me and society and cannot be harmful to others.

The 3rd Participant talked about religion and her social life as:

I have a religion and it is Christianity. I believe in religion and it plays a great role in my life. It has great importance for me because our living patterns and customs are just according to my religion. And I am spending my life purely according to my religion.

The 4th Participant viewed religion and social life as:



“Yes, of course, my religion taught me all of the moral values, how to worship the creator of the universe, and all other aspects of the life. I can die but will not leave my religion.”

The 5th Participant said:

Christianity is my religion. My religion is not a big deal to me. I am not so regular to go to church. I am studying at a university where I have Muslim fellows. Although my family is deeply engaged in religion yet my fellow's religion affects me a lot.

The 6th Participant reviewed her religion and social life as:

I don't believe that much in an organized religion. Religion is a personal choice and if you want to be religious, that's your choice. It's part of my life but in a specific way. I do believe there's a higher being but I'm not churchgoing. I don't think that listening to a minister or following a church's rules will save anyone from hell.

In conclusion, the intertwining of religion and social life shapes the very fabric of individual existence. As observed through the diverse perspectives shared, religion influences familial customs, personal values, and social interactions. For some, adherence to religious practices is deeply ingrained, guiding every aspect of their daily routines, and moral compass. Others may find themselves more loosely tied to the organized religion, opting for a more personal and spiritual connection. However, despite varying degrees of devoutness, the common thread among these accounts is the recognition of religion's impact on one's sense of duty, morality, and humanity. As Plato astutely noted, true virtue lies in fulfilling one's duty, a principle echoed across religious teachings worldwide. Ultimately, whether through structured rituals or personal beliefs, religion serves as a guiding light in navigating the complexities of social life, fostering compassion, empathy, and a shared commitment to the betterment of humankind. Individuals find that religion and social life have a profoundly transformative effect on someone's personal life. All the religions in the world are preaching for humanity. Religion is based on humanity.

Theme 3. Religious Discrimination in Educational Environments

In the educational institutes, minorities get treated in a strange manner by the followers of other religions. It has been observed that if the member of a minority group gets friendly treatment until she discloses her identity.

However, soon after the revelation of her religion, her fellows start avoiding her and stop sharing food with her. The females from minority felt discrimination in attitudes when they found their Muslims fellows reluctant in trying their food.

The 1st Participant said about religion and educational institutions as:

“I feel discrimination among my Muslim Class fellows. Teachers treat us like an extra thing. They make me feel like a minority student. Due to this discrimination, I can’t show good performance in study.”

Whereas, the 2nd Participant said:

Teaching should be beyond the boundaries of religious differences. It should be taught to the children when they are in schools to learn empathy and religious harmony. Schools need long been seen as gateways with a glorious mainstream and innovative future, free of religious superstition.

The 3rd Participant have the following view about religion:

In my experience, interactions with peers with different religious backgrounds in my institution have been a mixed bag. Initially, when my religious identity isn't known, I often find that my interactions with others were quite friendly and inclusive. However, things tend to change once my religion becomes apparent. There's a noticeable shift in behavior with some individuals becoming distant or even avoiding me altogether.

The intersection of religion and educational institutions often reveals a complex dynamic marked by discrimination, misunderstandings, and shifts in behavior. As illustrated by the experiences shared, students of different religious backgrounds may encounter ostracism or avoidance from peers once their religious identity is known. This discrimination can negatively impact academic performance and overall well-being thus, creating barriers to meaningful engagement within the educational environment. Additionally, there may exist underlying biases within the educational system that devalue religious conviction and perpetuate a perception of religious belief as incompatible with enlightenment. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for fostering greater understanding and empathy among students and faculty. By promoting exclusivity, respect for diversity, and open dialogue, the educational institutions can strive to create



environments where individuals of all religious backgrounds feel valued and supported in their pursuit of learning and personal growth.

Theme 4. Interplay of Religious Affiliation and Academic Experience

Religious affiliation and academic patterns intertwine in intricate ways within educational institutions, shaping not only individual identities but also influencing academic trajectories and social dynamics. The relationship between religion and academia encompasses a spectrum of experiences, ranging from the integration of religious teachings into the curriculum to the impact of religious diversity on the university campus culture. Students often navigate the intersection of their religious beliefs with academic pursuits, encountering opportunities for spiritual growth, intellectual exploration, and sometimes challenges arising from cultural or ideological differences. Understanding the complexities of religious affiliation within academic setting is essential for fostering inclusive learning environments and promoting dialogue around the intersection of faith, education, and personal development. In this theme, the research delved into the multifaceted relationship between religious affiliation and academic patterns, while examining the diverse perspectives and experiences that shape this dynamic within educational institutions.

The 1st Participant said:

Religious diversity on campus has been a defining aspect of my academic journey. Interacting with students from different religious backgrounds has broadened my perspective and enriched my learning experience. While there are moments of disagreement or discomfort, I've found that embracing religious diversity fosters a sense of community and mutual respect. It encourages dialogue, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the complexities of faith in our academic and social lives.

The 2nd Participant viewed about his religious affiliation and academic patterns as:

Being part of a diverse educational environment, I've had the chance to interact with peers from various religious backgrounds. While these interactions have enriched my academic experience, they've also presented challenges. Differences in religious beliefs sometimes lead to misunderstandings or tensions in the classroom. Navigating these cultural and religious differences requires open-

mindedness, respect, and a willingness to engage in dialogue that promotes understanding and mutual respect.

The 3rd Participant said about his religious affiliation and academic patterns that:

As a student, I am deeply committed to my religious beliefs, I see my academic journey as an opportunity for spiritual growth and intellectual exploration. I find ways to integrate my faith into my studies, whether it's through analyzing religious texts in literature classes or exploring ethical dilemmas through the lens of my religious teachings. However, I also encounter challenges when academic requirements clash with religious obligations, forcing me to navigate a delicate balance between my academic pursuits and my religious convictions.

In conclusion, the relationship between religious affiliation and academic patterns within educational institutions are complex and multifaceted one. As illustrated by the experiences shared, students encounter both opportunities for enrichment and challenges stemming from cultural and ideological differences. Despite these challenges, embracing religious diversity fosters a sense of community, mutual respect, and dialogue essential for promoting understanding and empathy. For students deeply committed to their religious beliefs, the academic journey serves as a platform for spiritual growth and intellectual exploration, albeit with the need to navigate a delicate balance between academic pursuits and religious convictions. By acknowledging and understanding the complexities of religious affiliation within academic settings, educational institutions can foster inclusive learning environments that celebrate diversity and promote personal development in all its dimensions.

Conclusion

The themes explored in the current study highlighted and proved that religious affiliation acts as a foundation of identity and community. The participants expressed different levels of involvement with their religious identity and how it affected their social relationships. While some expressed a deep commitment to their faith, others described a more nuanced relationship, acknowledging its importance while not being overtly religious. However, a common thread among all participants was the



recognition of religion as a significant aspect of their personal and social lives.

The narratives shed light on the challenges faced by minority students in educational settings, particularly regarding discrimination and marginalization. Instances of social exclusion based on religious identity were reported which highlighted the need for greater exclusivity and tolerance within educational institutions. The participants' experiences underscore the impact of religious diversity on campus dynamics and academic performance.

The research findings emphasize the relationship between social belonging and academic outcomes among minority students. Interventions aimed at enhancing students' sense of belonging resulted in improvements in both academic performance and overall well-being. Additionally, interactions with university authorities were found to foster a sense of connection and engagement among students thus, enhancing their involvement in campus. In order to encourage religious acceptance at the universities, authorities should contextualize the university's atmosphere and make it suitable for minority students so that they can integrate substances of inter-religious coordination.

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