

Ayra Indrias Patras \*  
Ahmed Usman \*\*

## **Intersection of Gender, Work and Caste: The Case of Christian Female Sweepers of Lahore**

### **Abstract**

To explore the intersection of gender, class, caste, and work impacting the identity of Christian minority community in Pakistan, the present study makes an attempt to bring into light the socio religious and occupational challenges interwoven with patriarchal constraints Christian women sweepers are confronted with. The Study has drawn inferences from the theory of intersectionality, which espouses that multiple social divisions based on subordinated identities shape up people's subjectivities increasing the likelihood of deprivation, discrimination and disadvantages. Exploring the lived realities of women sweepers, the study has drawn its findings from 20 in-depth interviews and 3 focused group discussions with women sweepers. The study findings can facilitate the understanding of the dehumanizing and degrading nature of cleaning work intersecting with gender disparity adversely affecting people existing at the margins of the society. The study findings can be incorporated towards the creation of strategies in order to improve the marginalized minority community in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Christian, Female, Sweepers, Intersectionality, Identity, Gender, Work, Caste

### **Introduction**

The report on Pakistan's census 2017 released by the Government of Pakistan placed its population at 207,774,520, but it did not release the data of religious minorities in Pakistan, which according to the previously held 1998 census (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 1998) religious minorities are 3.73 % of the then total 202 million total population in Pakistan that includes Hindu 1.60%, Christians 1.59% and other scheduled caste 0.25%, Ahmadis 0.22% and Parsis, Sikhs and Buddhists 0.07%. A substantial population of religious minorities has an ethnic origin as majority Christians and Hindus are concentrated in Punjab and Sindh respectively. A sizeable population of these two minority communities in

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\* Ayra Indrias Patras, PhD Scholar, Department of Gender Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore.

\*\* Dr. Ahmed Usman, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore.

Pakistan is socio-economically poor, socially depressed and politically powerless situated mostly at the fringes of the society (Raina, 2014).

In late nineteenth century, the 80% of the Christians, who are now in Pakistan, were converted by westerner missionaries, who had roots in American and Western Europe, and these native people, who embraced Christianity, were mostly from the untouchable castes namely Dalits, Chamris and Churas (Amjad–Ali, 2015). The change of religion did offer some social upwards mobility to these people; however, the ancestral occupation of the majority Christian remains stayed the same till today. They cannot escape the clutches and consequence of caste based prejudices emanating from their degrading occupation and minority status in Pakistan and this ominous shadow of caste keeps haunting them in discriminatory filled manifestations. Describing the prevalence of caste based discrimination and economic deprivation of certain groups known as untouchables in South Asia, the empirical study supported the assertion that scheduled caste is used for untouchables in Pakistan that include mostly low caste Hindus and Christians in Sindh and Punjab respectively (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). Espousing for egalitarian values irrespective of discrimination based on class, colour, creed, Islamic discourse in Pakistan vehemently discourages the caste based discrimination, but the prevalence of exclusionary practices sprouted from caste disparities are widely practiced in Pakistan and people of higher caste avoids sharing utensils with poor Christians in Punjab and Scheduled caste Hindus in Sindh (Guzdar, 2007).

The socio-cultural, economic and political marginality of Christians as a minority religious group in Pakistan is well substantiated by various studies (Wallbridge, 2003; Malik, 2002; Gabriel, 2007; Sookhdeo, 2002). However very scant interest is shown in investigating the specific group of Christians whose number are disproportionally higher in janitorial workforce in relation to their total population. From the perspective of urban development policy for the removal of waste work, Beall (2006), from his ethnographic work with Christian street sweepers, pointed at the historical contingent specificities of caste–like relations maintaining social categories and hierarchies. Exploring the historical trajectories, the anthropological account of Christians in Punjab was penned down by (O'Brien, 2012), who argued for the respect of the unconquered resilience of the Christians sweepers, who survived in the face of grave social challenges and millennium old oppression ascribed to their Chura caste after they were subdued by Aryans to the relegated status through ethnic cleansing, which restricted them to cleaning occupation. Sara analyzed the caste consciousness in Pakistan connected to the notions of purity and impurity which relates to the concept of clean and unclean, therefore many Chura Christians in Pakistan are associated with pollution due to their work as sweepers or sanitary workers (Singha, 2015). The mainstream women's movement in Pakistan has been generally addressing the concerns of religious minorities in its journey of activism, and extends social solidarity to the

voices of minority communities; however, it has not looked into the specificities of minority women living at the fringes. So far, not a single study has been conducted in Pakistan to investigate the lived conditions of Christian women street sweepers in Pakistan. Voiding this gap, the present study had made an attempt to explore the intersection of gender, class, caste, religion and work impacting the lives of women of marginalized community in Pakistan. The study has drawn its theoretical underpinning from the theory of intersectionality to substantiate that unequal social divisions intersect to increase and internalize double disadvantages and discrimination among the marginalized groups of the society.

The exploration about the concerns and constraints of minority women entangled in degrading work conditions clarify social change discourses towards social empowerment of women and support the creation of strategies to address the concerns of the deprived and marginalized section of the society.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on the responses drawn from the in-depth interviews with 20 women participants, among them 12 women were working as street sweepers employed by Lahore Waste Management and 8 were working as domestic cleaners with private households. Participants were selected through purposive sampling technique from the Christian slums namely Marzipura Ravi Road in Lahore. There are approximately 156 Christian homes in closely knitted Christian settlement and both men and women of this locality invariably work as sweepers in factories, schools, hospitals and Lahore Waste Management Company.

The study employed qualitative school of thought believing that social meaning is rooted in lived material conditions. The study positions itself within the qualitative approach to explore the social realities constructed by the perceptions of the actors, who themselves internalize the meaning systems and operate within the perceived domain. The study has formulated questions from semi structured to open ended in order to facilitate the interviewer to focus on specific topics and to generate views and opinions on their challenges and constraints at work and home. These Open-ended questions were derived after the review of literatures. Questions were posed, such as: What are the problems you face at your workplace? Do you like your work? What are the challenges your community face in janitorial work? Do you think that sweepers face social and religious discrimination due to their work with dirt? What forms of discrimination do you face and from whom? What is the educational condition of the children of sweeper community? During interviews, probing queries and informal community conversations were also conducted. The time span for each interview was 45 minutes to one hour conducted in Urdu/Punjabi language. Digital recorder was used subject to the approval of participants as a few participants were reluctant to

record their voices given the sensitivity of the nature of questions relating to their minority status. With the exception of four interviews in which interviewees were not comfortable with recording, the remaining interviews were audio-recorded and diary notes were taken.

Common themes were identified from the responses followed by discovering the patterns. Similarities and reoccurrences of the phenomenon were drawn from the responses of the participants. In order to ensure interpretative validity of the responses, which is to present a degree that a researcher accurately portrays the meaning given by the participants of what is being studied and. the strategy to do this, is to obtain feedback from the participants by discussing findings with them to determine whether they agree with you or modifications are needed to represent their meaning (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011). The findings were discussed with the interviewees, who shared almost the same response with the exception of a few, who added some more clarification, which was incorporated in the results.

Responses were viewed by analyzing the intersectionality of multiple social divisions based on religion, caste, class, and gender, shaping peoples' subjective realities and synergies as well as increasing disadvantage, discrimination and deprivation of rights. At an epistemological level, feminist social science legitimizes women's lived experiences as a source of knowledge as the ordinary and extra ordinary events of women lives are worthy of critical reflection as they inform the understanding of the world (Wasco, 2000). The study used the feminist frame by considering the voices of minority women as a source of knowledge.

## **Findings**

### **Ghettoized Christian Slums**

Experiencing social exclusion sweeper communities are ghettoized in small pockets of urban slums in various metropolitan cities in Pakistan. The city Lahore alone has 9 concentrated Christian colonies in urban slums mostly at the edges of the posh and affluent localities and a few of them are situated at the outskirts of the city dwellings. Around 200 to 600 cloistered hovels in dark and dingy streets are encompassed in such settlements inhabiting mostly street sweepers' sanitation workers (sewer men). Reasoned to their marginalized social status of garbage workers, they mostly live in isolated, secluded and closed societies (Bertheir & Hector, 2003). The internalization of their marginality and low social status due to their work with garbage and dirt is deeply embedded in the psyche of sweepers as they themselves prefer to live in areas inhabited by sweeper community. There is a strong sense of internalization of inferiority among the women sweepers due to

their minority religion and the nature of work they perform and they feel comfortable living with their own people. As reflected in the words of the woman:

Muslims do not like us because of our dirty work but living here with our *baradari* religious community we feel comfortable and relaxed because these people are also working like us and we do not have to hide. In time of sorrow and happiness we look after each other and when I go to work I can leave my children with my neighbor and I don't feel any kind of fear.

### **Disgracing the Dignity of Work**

Women sweepers face humiliation due to their nature of cleaning work they are engaged in as they are often called *Churi* and *Bhangi* to ridicule their work with waste removal. As echoed in the words of a 55 years old woman sweeper:

We sweepers are called as Chura by these Muslims as they make fun of our work but they do not realize that we clean their waste and they consider us unclean but we have to ignore their bad behavior. I take pride in my work that I do not beg rather I work.

The discursive construction of the janitorial labour as dirty work erodes the dignity of the labour causing dignity injuries and robs the workers from safe, respectful, equitable and healthy working conditions (Mahalingam, Jagannathan, & Selvaraj, 2018). Is it not an irony that while cleaning away the dirt, these sweepers themselves become dirt in the eyes of others? Association with waste work stripped away the dignity of labour, self-esteem and self-worth. The socio-cultural status of sweepers in the Pakistani society draw semblance from the living realities of Dalits/untouchable in India, who has historically been out casted from the Hindus' four strands hierarchical caste stratification and these outcastes include sweepers, scavengers, washer man and leathers workers and within the outcaste sweepers are inferior of all, which placed them into double subalternized position (Chowdhury, 2017).

### **Patriarchal Burdens**

The women are not only the subject of social prejudices they encounter in public domain, their life in their private spheres are often marked by the episodes of domestic violence from their husbands explaining pains and perils of their lived realities.

I have seen many problems in my life, I have faced domestic violence from my husbands, my young boy got intoxicated into drugs because my husband was involved in selling out alcohol. I did two jobs and collected some money and got my daughters married but my younger daughter got divorced because her husband

was very abusive and accused her for extra-marital relations. Now my son steals my money to buy his drugs and I pray May God correct him and make him a good man.

The unrelenting humiliation, dehumanization and distress both at their workplaces and private homes entangled these workers in the web of multiple jeopardy. These bitter social realities are characterized by the intersectional discrimination emanating from occupational status, caste lineage, religion and gender.

### **Lack of Observance of Health and Safety Measures**

While cleaning roads and streets, sweepers are hardly seen observing any kind of health protective measures like gloves, masks or boots. Women made use of their dust stained stoles (*dupattas*) to cover their head and nose but It does not protect them from inhaling pollutants and toxins. Therefore, due to close contact with waste and garbage, it is not a surprise to find many sweepers contracting respiratory diseases and skin infections. Medical benefits are very nominal; in case of medical support, they have to avail the facility of government run social security hospitals, which are already overcrowded with general public. Staying oblivious to their health concerns, the employer companies fail to extend specific medical amenities to these workers. The labour supply of the janitorial staff is privatized in Lahore Waste Management Company and sweepers, who that fall under the category of private workers and daily wagers do not have medical, pension and other employment benefits. These outsourcing policies allowed the private sector to make use of lowly paid services of labour under precarious working conditions and short terms contracts and insecure jobs (Miraftab, 2004). It also largely cuts down the cost of permanent employment at the expense of the dignity and rights of labour, resultantly spiraling the already marginalized segment into a web of poverty. A woman sweeper, who has been working for almost 8 years, as a private contractual worker, shared her ordeal of how she managed with her eye operation.

Continuous exposure to dust during sweeping the roads has damaged my eye and I had to take a credit loan on a high interest rate from the money lender with the support of my neighbor. There was along queue in government hospital and my eye was getting worse and it was very painful too. I asked my supervisor to help me but I was told that there are no health benefits for temporary workers. I got my eye operation done in a private hospital and now I can see properly and also paying off my debt.

### **Non-Conducive Environment for Children Education**

These women sweepers are enslaved by their day long work routines and unending household chores. They day starts as early as 5 a.m. in the morning because they

have to report to their first attendance at work at 6 a.m. Many women leave children at home at the mercy of the elderly women or neighbours in their family, who do not take interest in sending their children to schools. Resultantly, many children of women sweepers are either dropped out from the school due to poor performance or lack of attendance. Although, women have higher aspiration towards their children education as they hate seeing their children adopting their profession but in reality many young sons often end up joining the janitorial work. Many a times, Education of a child is seen not only as a cost that parents have to pay to bear the educational expenses but a loss of an earning too. For sweeper communities, the prospects for attaining social mobility through education is continued to be a uphill task (Sultana & Subedi, 2015). In the sweeper community, many young boys, in the age bracket from 13 to 18 years, are found with low self-esteem and they themselves despise and derogate their parent work due to the negative societal image constructed about sweepers. Minority adolescents of both Christian and Hindu communities have higher leanings towards lower levels of self-esteem than their counterparts of majority Muslims in Pakistan and their perception of negative environment and negative response in the form of discriminatory treatment meted out to religious minority in Pakistan result in low competence and self-worth (Iqbal, Ahmad, & Ayub, 2012).

### **Sexual Slurs from Strangers**

Sweeper women working in private squares and on public roads are more vulnerable to sexual slurs from the road passers. These women workers are not only subjected to abuse by strangers but majority complaint that their male supervisors scold them with bad language that discouraged them to lodge any complaint about incidents of sexual harassment they face from strangers on the roads. A woman sweeper shared:

These bad men and rascal boys taunt us with slurs and sexual abuses and run away on their motor bikes, sometime we abused them in return but most of the time we walk fast in order to avoid their physical touching. Once I wore a dark orange coloured suit and a shopkeeper made fun of me by saying look the churi is wearing a bright colour and cracked a joke on my clothes. I walked fast although I felt like giving him a slap but I did not want to make a scene on the road.

On asking that has she ever registered a complaint with the employers. With distress she said, to whom I should complain because no-one trusts our story. Our supervisor needs work only; he hardly has anytime to listen our stories. In order to protect them from sexual harassment, many women take their husbands or young sons with them to work as a protective shield.

## **Discussion**

For mapping multiple marginality of women sweepers, the study has borrowed inferences from theory of Intersectionality coined by Crenshaw, which describes that multiple strand of women subordinated identities such as gender, race, class should not be dealt in a mutually exclusive terrain instead they intersect to influence and shape the lived realities of people (Crenshaw, 1991). In the domain of the multiplicity of different categories, the domination of social power excludes and marginalize those, who are different and differences within the intra group should not be conflated and ignored. Drawing inferences from the postmodern feminists, woman is not a composite and monolithic category for analysis and they questioned the binary division of the reality, which do not unfold the complexities of the lived experiences (Derrida, 1976). Therefore, the present study attempts to explore how the gender intersects with work and stigma of being Christian sweepers and lower caste in Pakistan. The study has allowed unveiling the occupational challenges and constraints of women workers and its relevance of their membership in low caste group and minority religion coupled patriarchal domestic burdens. Drawing insights from the definition of subaltern by Gayatri Spivak, who called the marginal groups of the society as subaltern (Spivak, 2000), the present study called the women sweepers as subalterns. The term subaltern is often applied to describe the oppressed groups in the society (Graham, 1996).

Critiquing the textual analysis of Muhammad Hanif in his book the *Our Lady of Alice*, in which the author highlighted the oppressed condition of a Christian woman in Pakistan, Abroo argued that by using stagnant stereotyping to describe the oppressions of Pakistani women as weak, and helpless creature, the voices of subalterns are further silenced (Nazar, 2016). Nazar further added on that when the group is entitled as ‘subaltern’ it cannot be represented. I disagree with this assertion because the oppressed situations of the marginalized people ascribed them in to the notions of subalternity, and they themselves can speak if their voices are taken into consideration for analytical constructions of the gendered subaltern. Spivak somewhat also feebly argues that the academic feminists need to speak to the subaltern women in order to learn from their lived experiences and realities (Gandhi, 1998). Therefore, their voices need to be unveiled and the discriminations they face in their daily lives that contradicts the values of the basic human rights need to be articulated in its original context. The positionality of the subject gets significance in the feminist discourse for drawing epistemological construction of knowledge from the gendered subaltern (Gandhi, 1998). Focusing on Christian female sweepers, the study brought forward the daily experience of these marginalized workforce navigating their work and social spheres. The study contends that the narratives of marginalized need to be remembered and recognized that prevent the further marginalization of their stories. If their narratives are not brought forward, then there is a likelihood that de-narratives

stand complicit to naturalization and reproduction of inequality will lead to ethnical wrongs that need to be reversed (Mahalingam, Jagannathan, & Selvaraj, 2018).

The twenty-first century is fast moving from labor intensive to technology driven industries. While Pakistan is adopting modern labor structures, the janitorial work is still driven by millennium old biases, keeping the sweeper community subjected to the same caste-based prejudicial treatment and maintaining the policy of keeping them at the fringes of labor market to traditional bonded labor. The social power in describing differences should not turn into power of domination instead; these differences should be the source of social empowerment. The janitorial work needs not to be a source of shame, stigma and silence; instead dignity needs to be accorded to workers for their significant services through cleaning work.

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