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Informal congregational social workers and promotion of social welfare in sermons: a study of Shia women religious scholars of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The promotion of social welfare is dependent on the three-fold partnership between the state, private bodies, and community groups including formal and informal social workers. This paper evaluates how Shia women's religious scholars are providing guidance for social welfare during sermon delivery in congregations. A qualitative design was used to interview five Shia women scholars, who also define themselves as informal congregational social workers, across different cities of Pakistan. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide and analyzed through the thematic content analysis approach. Four themes were found: (1) Women's Status, Rights and Protection of the Disadvantaged, (2) Care Ethics, Social Justice, and Community Service, (3) Universal Charity and Religious Taxes, and (4) Development of a Spiritual Capital for Sustenance of Social Welfare. There is a role for diverse Muslim sects, and other religions, in pluralistic societies to coordinate and strengthen social welfare using religious ethics. Professional social workers can benefit from partnering with congregational social workers to promote commitment and allegiance to social welfare.

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Introduction

A three-fold partnership exists between the state, private bodies, and community groups for the maintenance of social welfare and the protection of the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized members of society (Baldock, Manning, & Vickerstaff, 2007; Lyberaki & Tinios, 2014). Within this broad alliance, it is both the formal and informal social workers who play a prominent role in promoting and sustaining social welfare (Vetvik, Danbolt, Furman, Benson, & Canda, 2018). Social workers have been known to use religious adherence and spiritual beliefs to encourage people to commit to social welfare ethics of equality and justice (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018). However, many social workers have faced difficulty in using religion and spirituality to promote social welfare, due to lack of training and education, theological knowledge, the complexity of

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religious pluralism in the community, or having to deal with clients with secular orientations (Gilbert, 2000; Knitter, 2010).

Alternately, religious scholars find it easier to promote social welfare within their sectarian communities, as congregants are more homogenous in their ideologies and beliefs (Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2014). Most religious congregations do not convene only for worship and are also driven by a spirit of social service (Cnaan, Sinha, & McGrew, 2004). Religious scholars and congregational leaders have been found to assume positions as informal congregational social workers by educating and endorsing practices of social welfare (Cnaan & Boddie, 2001; Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013; Yancey & Garland, 2014). In fact, religious communities have an advantage of providing collective support for social welfare and also for exerting soft pressure on sustained commitment to welfare principles (Ellison & George, 1994; Lockhart, 2005). Scholars from the Muslim world also agree that within the different sects of Islam, there is an integration of informal social work and social welfare initiatives by religious leaders and scholars (Ragab, 2016).

The Pakistan background

The establishment of both a social welfare system (Ali, 2018; Easterly, 2001; Gazdar, 2011) and the social work profession (Critelli, 2010; Graham, Al-Krenawi, & Zaidi, 2007; Nikku, 2014) has not been prominent or successful in Pakistan. The former is mainly because of low government commitment to public spending, which is a dismal 6% of the GDP (Iqbal & Asad, 2013), and the latter because social work is regarded as a colonial legacy, with little cultural relevance (Healy, 2008). The most dominant area of social welfare is the Zakat and Baitul-Maal collection for disbursement to the poor (Gazdar, 2011); and though social workers are involved in the distribution of these charitable funds, the final decisions rest with those who have greater bureaucratic and political power (Jamal, 2010; Sayeed, 2004). Research from the country suggests that informal agents, like family and religious centers, are propelling spending for social welfare, but it is not certain how many of these informal agents are women or how family and religious centers motivate women to commit to social welfare (Iqbal & Asad, 2013).

In the absence of a centralized social welfare system and also an inadequate capacity of formal social workers in the country, there may be a substantial role for informal congregational social workers and religious scholars to promote and expand social welfare within their micro habitus (Akhtar, 1996). Shias comprise 13% of the Muslim population, making them a significant world group of over 200 million people (Miller, 2009). Approximately 40 million Shias reside in Pakistan (Vatanka, 2012). The Shia ideology of welfare is based on social justice and the belief that the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahlebait*¹ (peace be upon them) must be emulated as the best models for judicious

practices (Abdo et al., 2014; Demirci, 2013). All practicing Shias frequent congregational assemblies in order to mourn the martyrdom of the *Ahlebait* and ritualize sectarian allegiance (Cole, 2002; Sutherlin, 2007). The prominent part of the congregation is the sermon delivery by a religious scholar, who uses Islamic history and doctrine to narrate moral codes and disseminate the social practices of Islam (Shanneik, 2015).

Women have gained social status and a means to advocate for social welfare through congregational social work in Christianity (Yancey & Garland, 2014), and this is also true for Shia women. Feminist welfare principles in the Shia faith allow significant responsibility and leadership to women (Mernissi, 1991). Bound by strict principles of gender segregation, women congregations provide women religious scholars considerable power to guide their women congregants on matters related to religious, social, and economic practices (Mamodaly & Fakirani, 2012; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2002; Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016). The primary means of communicating principles of social welfare during sermon delivery has been through popular narrations of the lives and practices of the women of the *Ahlebait* (Abou Zahab, 2008; Askari; Hegland, 1998b). Sermons about the Prophet's daughter, Hazrat² Fatima, and granddaughters, Hazrat Zainab and Hazrat Kulsoom, are known to exert great spiritual and emotional power in Shia women congregants (Greenberg, 2007); and also to influence strong dedication to rituals and practices (D'Souza, 2012). Relentless loyalty in Shia communities is secured for the women of the *Ahlebait* due to: (i) their relation to the Prophet Muhammad, (ii) their high rank and status in Islam, and (iii) the great sacrifices that they made in retaining legacies of Islam and upholding welfare practices (Hazleton, 2010; Osman, 2014).

However, we need to further identify which social welfare practices of the women of the *Ahlebait* are promoted in their microreligious communities (Hall, 2001; Mpedi, 2008; Netting & O'Connor, 2016). In order to fill this gap, this study aimed to explore the narrations that are used in congregations, during sermon delivery by women scholars, in order to promote social welfare amongst Shia congregants. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study of its kind, which attempts to make social work more culturally responsive and investigates the potential role of religion in promoting social welfare; which many scholars have recommended is needed (Barise, 2005; Nikku, 2014; Rehmatullah, 2002). The relationship between social work and religion is relevant especially for Pakistan, as the people are known to be ruled by strong religious ideologies (Ispahani, 2017). This research is also valuable because it attempts to understand the role of Shia women agents and gendered institutes, or religious centers, in promoting social welfare. It is hoped that this research can also help in mapping the integration of congregational social work and social welfare development for other Muslim countries, developing countries, and nations characterized by religious pluralism.

Materials and methods

This paper is based on a qualitative study, which has the advantage of providing rich data about lived experiences and practices (Polkinghorne, 2005). Qualitative interviews are especially useful for feminist research which needs deeper exploration and insights (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). The findings of this paper are based on in-depth interviews with women religious scholars who: (a) have formally studied the religion, (b) are currently reading religious sermons in Pakistan, and (c) perceive themselves as informal congregational social workers. The term “informal congregational social work” for this study has been derived from international scholarship (Yancey & Garland, 2014), but modified for relevance to this study to mean: a Shia religious scholar who promotes social welfare during sermon delivery using narrations from the Prophet Muhammad and the *Ahle bait*.

Ethics

Ethics approval for this study was taken from the Institutional Review Board, Forman Christian College University. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants have been secured. As this study is about a specific religious sect, the effort was made not to discuss any area that may emphasize sectarian controversy. It was agreed between the scholar participants and researcher that the questions and findings were about promoting community welfare and not about highlighting or justifying differences in sectarian ideology.

Sample

It is important to note that Shia women religious scholars study sermons, live or recorded, of other scholars during their study years and after, as preparation for their own sermons and for continued learning (Künkler, 2016; Zahra Academy, 2019). In this way, Shia religious scholars have expert knowledge of what context and themes are commonly discussed and narrated during sermons. The participants were sampled through the assistance of Shia women’s religious committees, who arrange women religious scholars to deliver congregational sermons at religious centers. A total of five willing women religious scholars, between the ages of 45 and 60 years, were interviewed. All religious scholars in the study defined themselves as informal congregational social workers. All participants have been reading religious sermons for more than 10 years across different cities in Pakistan and also in other countries with Pakistani Shia populations.³ All participants follow the same sect of Shia Islam, *Fiqa-e-Jaffriya*.⁴ All participants have studied for periods ranging from 6 to 8 years in Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria; and all are multilingual in English, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian. Their degrees range

from Masters to PhD. At the completion of their study, they have been awarded the title of *Alimah*, meaning a woman religious scholar.

Data collection

The data were collected during a period of 2 months, from January to February 2019, across three cities of Pakistan, including Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. The interviews lasted from 1 to 2 hours and were held in convenient settings for the participants including their homes or the Shia religious center (also known as an *Imambargah*⁵). The interviews were conducted in English and Urdu and audio-recording and notes were taken by the author and a research assistant. As each subsequent participant confirmed the same themes, and by the fourth interview no new theme was emerging, the saturation point was confirmed with the last participant (Saunders et al., 2018). The interview guide for this study was semi-structured and open-ended, with the broad questions comprising (a) which social welfare ethics are promoted during sermon delivery in women's religious congregations, and (b) which narrations about the practices of the women of the *Ahlebait* are used most often to promote social welfare.

Analysis

A qualitative thematic content analysis approach was used for data analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Translation of Urdu notes to English for data analysis was completed by the author who is fluent in both languages. Themes were identified with relevance to the aim of the study after listening to audio recordings and reading notes repeatedly (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2018). All other information has been excluded. Manual coding of the themes was undertaken and confirmation of the themes was sought through the help of a research assistant (Basit, 2003). The research assistant, trained in the objectives of the study, was present during the interviews to assist in recording and taking notes and also provided support for inter-observer consistency to secure internal reliability (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997). The research assistant is a practicing Shia who served for the committee of a religious center for 8 years and has attended countless sermons. In addition, the author's native belonging to the Shia community and many years of attending religious sermons have been advantageous for data analysis in terms of establishing rapport with participants, identification with the context, and interpretation of the data (Greene, 2014). The author and other practicing Shias attend more than 80 sermons in a year through the months of Muharram, Safar, Rabiulawal, and Ramadan; and they may visit the religious center weekly for sermons and also for funerals and weddings (Dogra, 2019). To establish validity, respondent validation (Mays & Pope, 2000) was sought by sharing the final findings from (i) all five participants of the study, (ii) two Shia

women religious scholars who had not participated in the study, and (iii) two practicing Shia congregants. All of these groups confirmed the final findings of this study.

Results

Four themes have been found during the interviews and each theme was mentioned and confirmed by all five scholar participants. Each theme is a reflection of social welfare and has implications for congregational social work in the community. The findings included 1. Women's Status, Rights and Protection of the Disadvantaged; 2. Care Ethics, Social Justice, and Community Service; 3. Universal Charity and Religious Taxes; 4. Development of a Spiritual Capital for Sustenance of Social Welfare.

Women's status, rights and protection of the disadvantaged

Scholar participants explained how sermons have been used to elucidate the high status of the women of the *Ahle bait* in order to secure rights for women and protection of disadvantaged women. Sermons commonly discuss that women are: (i) gateways for heaven, (ii) capable of being independent, and (iii) equally responsible for social service. A participant shared that the comparison of piety and social responsibility of Hazrat Fatima with her father during sermons was a means of promoting gender equality and the high status of women:

Hazrat Fatima can be likened to the Prophet Muhammad in demeanor and piety. She was a guide and role model for all Muslim women ... and had consequential responsibility for service to Islam.

It was agreed that women were afforded great respect in Islam, but that life was difficult for Muslim women in conservative and patriarchal societies, which do not reflect true Islamic principles. In this way sermons regularly reminded women congregants about the respect and treatment due to them, as safeguarded by the Prophet. An informal congregational social worker shared how reminders in sermons advocated for the rights of women:

The Prophet warned that people must observe their duty to God in respect to women, and treat them well.

Scholars expounded how religious congregations have been helpful in providing emotional relief and companionship for disadvantaged women, especially those who are poor, unmarried, divorced, or widowed. Many women have found refuge, informal work, and emotional support through the religious congregational system. One of the participants described how

sermons regularly remind devotees to support and help the disadvantaged women and children in the community:

Imam Hussain's last message to his sister (Hazrat Zainab) was to patiently take care of the widows and orphans. Surely, Allah loves the one who protects the weak and oppressed.

Informal congregational social workers in the study shared how they exerted social pressure for the integration and care of aging parents and other aging members of the community. This was done by a regular discussion about the value of the elderly companions during the battle of Karbala⁶ and also by communicating the rewards in the afterlife for providing care to parents. A participant mentioned that sermons often endorse the importance of attention and care for aging parents:

You must live so close to your parents that you can hear their voices when they call you. Remember that on resurrection day, those who have taken care of their parents are closer to God.

Care ethics, social justice, and community service

The informal congregational social workers in the study discussed how care ethics have primarily been disseminated through the life accounts of Hazrat Fatima. Hazrat Fatima from a very young age assumed the responsibility and care for her father and his vulnerable followers by adopting nursing duties. She also assumed administrative and logistical tasks, imparted religious education, and provided great emotional support to the early Muslim community. A scholar participant shared the popular reminder used in women's congregations about Hazrat Fatima's care ethics:

Hazrat Fatima from a young age became the mother of her father and was therefore known as 'Umme Abiha' (mother of her father). She remained protective of the young and newly formed Muslim community and ensured that the weak received support and care during hardships and persecution.

Congregational sermons have been commonly used to promote the image of the Prophet's granddaughters as progressive and powerful agents for social justice and community welfare. It was difficult for Hazrat Zainab and Hazrat Kulsoom to remain just and service-oriented in the face of oppression and persecution, yet they remained loyal and committed for the welfare of the community and the survival of Islamic principles. Sermons regularly describe the stand for Islam and social justice that the Prophet's granddaughters took:

Ultimately, it was Hazrat Zainab and Hazrat Kulsoom ... two women alone without male relatives who saved Islam and stood for justice! They stood for what was right during extreme persecution and did not bow down despite extreme odds and torture.

With regard to social justice, it was discussed that sermons have been teaching two things. First, women will also have the opportunity to be a part of the Mehdi's army,⁷ and second women must show the opposite characteristics of the hypocritical Kufans who had betrayed the *Ahlebait*.

Both lessons during sermons have the aim of encouraging women to adopt principles of justice and equality. An informal congregational social worker explained how sermons frequently remind congregants about the merits of and relationship between loyalty and justice:

The Kufans have lost the chance of heaven in the afterlife due to their disloyalty and injustices to the Prophet's family. Only those who are loyal and just will be a part of the Mehdi's army ... they will be the lucky ones who will help in establishing justice across the world.

With sole responsibility to protect their community and save Islam the granddaughters of the Prophet survived extreme oppression by adopting community solidarity and service. They have been promoted as committed welfare agents who provided social services in education, health assistance, and emotional counseling. As described by one of the scholars's in the study, conditioning for community services, like counseling, religious education, and healthcare, is promoted through the trials of the women of the *Ahlebait*:

Hazrat Zainab and Hazrat Kulsoom became the leaders of a women's only army. Instead of swords and horses, they used community spirit and counseling. It was because of these efforts that the true principles of Islam remain alive today.

Universal charity and religious taxes

Religious scholars discussed the importance of maintaining charity and taxation for social welfare in the community. A prominent role model for Shia women has been the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat Khadija who gave all her wealth and money to charity. She was one of the wealthiest businesswomen of Arabia and religious sermons commonly remind congregations about the selfless donations she made to initiate the spirit of charity in early Islam. Regarding sermons about Hazrat Khadija's devotion to charity, one informal congregational social worker shared:

As a rich and independent businesswoman, Hazrat Khadija made the choice to give all her worldly possessions and assets for Islam. For all this benevolence and sacrifice she was promised a house made of pearls in heaven.

Another important point about charity that the informal congregational social workers addressed was that it must not be limited to just the community or Shia sect. Most Shia religious gatherings discuss the participation and worth of non-Shias and non-Muslims, such as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, who all honor and pay pilgrimage to Imam Husain. Sermons stress that charity

must be given to all who are deserving, as all humans are either brothers and sisters in humanity or brothers and sisters in love for Imam Husain. A participant described how congregants were consistently advised about the importance of universal charity, benevolence, and empathy for all humankind:

The Prophet and Husain belong to all the people of the world, and the Quran is for all of humanity. We are all bound together as children of Adam and Eve. It is because of this that our service and charity must be for all of humanity, and not just for Shias or Muslims.

Women religious scholars described that the discussion of religious taxes is common in women's religious congregations. This is because there is a lot of confusion about matters related to (i) the different types of religious taxes to be paid and the calculation for each,⁸ (ii) dues of women from different wealth backgrounds, and (iii) the collection and distribution of *Khums*⁹ for *Syed*¹⁰ members of the community. A scholar pointed out that congregants are often warned not to forgo tax payments:

Prayer is ordered along with taxes! If you offer prayer but do not pay taxes, then your prayer will not be accepted.

Development of a spiritual capital for sustenance of social welfare

The informal congregational social workers in this study explained how they believed it was important to maintain spiritual capital in the congregants in order to sustain basic ethics and social welfare in the community. Spiritual capital was described by the participants as (i) adhering to the five pillars of Islam, including faith, prayer, fasting, taxation, and pilgrimage, and (ii) promotion of *Huqooqul-Ibad* or service to mankind. One scholar mentioned that in her experience most sermons end with the reminder of the importance of spiritual capital:

It is only through the five pillars and *Huqooqul-Ibad* that one can ascend towards the peak of prosperity and happiness in this life. Without adherence to the pillars and community service, both this world and the next will be lost to you.

Religious scholars also reasoned that in modern times there was extreme pressure to rationalize and secularize, and it was the religious congregation and rituals of mourning for the *Ahlebait* that attempts to keep Shias rooted to spiritual practices and the foundations of religious belief. A scholar argued that loyalty for the *Ahlebait* is used in sermons to preserve the connection between spiritual beliefs and social welfare:

It is love for the Prophet and his *Ahlebait* that makes us see God and worship Him (God). If we love the *Ahlebait*, we must commit to service for mankind. In this way we will gain the approval of both *Allah* and *Ahlebait*.

Discussion

This paper presents how a few Shia women religious scholars, as informal congregational social workers, promote social welfare during sermon delivery. Findings suggest that sermons by informal congregational social workers are promoting the religious rights and status of women in Islam in order to empower them to commit to social responsibility and community service. Other research confirms that religious congregations regularly discuss the deep love and respect the Prophet had for the women of his family as exemplary human beings and guardians of Islam, and the high status that Islam awards to all women (Hamdar, 2009). It may be that religious congregations can become a more committed force to promote gender-based equality in Muslim countries that are known to be patriarchal and regressive against women (Alexander & Welzel, 2011; Ghadanfar, 2001). Also found in this study is that sermons encourage the support of the disadvantaged and aging members of the community. Other research confirms that Shia religious congregations have supported disadvantaged women members of the community for employment to fulfill multiple tasks¹¹ for the religious congregations (Douki, Zineb, Nacef, & Halbreich, 2007; Hegland, 1998a; Knodel & Ofstedal, 2003). Similarly, other researchers have also explored that old age care has been promoted through historical records which describe the contribution of elderly companions of the *Ahle-bait* (Al Jibouri, 2007). Support from congregations for disadvantaged populations can assume salience as most Muslim countries, including Pakistan, do not have significant social and state support for disadvantaged women members of the community or the elderly (Douki et al., 2007; Hajjar, 2004).

Findings from this study reveal that the lives of the women of the *Ahle-bait* are promoted in sermons by informal congregational social workers to promote basic social welfare principles of care ethics, social justice, and community service. Other scholarship confirms that the most dominant feature of Hazrat Fatima was her care ethic, which she maintained with selfless devotion for her family and community during the difficult early years of Islam and in face of severe oppression (Clohessy, 2009). In an era when women could not manage without male guardians, Hazrat Zainab and Hazrat Kulsoom not only survived without male relatives (Pinault, 2016) but were successful in raising their voices against powerful tyrants to promote social justice and humanitarianism (Al-Rahim, 2005). Women congregations have also supported the belief that if women adopted loyalty and justice, they could join the high ranks of the Mehdi's army, which would help spread justice in the world (Mahmood, 2006). Rarely are women in Islam considered agents of justice (Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2005) and again findings may suggest that there is potential for mobilization of women's social work through religious congregations for Shia women.

It was also found that informal congregational social workers encourage universal charity and commitment to religious taxes. Others agree that the charitable works of Hazrat Khadija have been promoted in religious congregations, while simultaneously encouraging work autonomy in women (Haylamaz, 2007). The spirit of charity has been encouraged as a universal and nonsectarian act, with distribution and assistance encouraged for all needy humans, and not limited to just Shias or Muslims (Salek, 2015). The findings of this study corroborate other studies in that Shia religious congregations provide consequential guidance for religious tax calculations and assistance for distribution to needy members of the community (Eisenlohr, 2015). In developing nations like Pakistan, tax evasion is common and it contributes to inadequate state spending for public welfare, and thus there is scope to improve commitment to taxes through religious networking and accountability (Brueckner, 2000; Chodorow, 2007). Finally, the findings of this study suggest that the development of spiritual capital is used to sustain social welfare and social development in Shia communities. Others agree that inculcating the basic pillars of Islam and love for *Ahlebait* help in effectively developing commitment to social service and welfare in Shias (Makin, 2017). Social capital building is important for developing collaboration, trust and reciprocity, and principles for community service (Kwok, 2003).

Overall, study findings suggest that Shia women religious scholars, as informal congregational social workers, are attempting to promote social welfare and commitment to community service in congregants through the themes presented in their sermons. Structural feminists have pointed out that women gain from increased stability and development when they are part of an institution that provides them governance participation and opportunities for gender-sensitive welfare development (Harding, 1999). For countries like Pakistan, services by informal congregational social workers are needed, in partnership with other agents, to promote social welfare for women in times of critical regional instability, natural calamities, and rising numbers of migrants, refugees, and IDPs (Kirmani & Khan, 2008). More research is needed on the actual impact on practices of social welfare and how Muslim sects, and other religions, as agents in a pluralistic world can coordinate to promote formal social welfare policies. This would not be easy, as the Muslim world is characterized by extreme sectarian division, and exclusion of women are excluded from policy development (Demant, 2006). Another concluding concern when considering the role of religion in influencing social practices is that of antagonistic forces, like politicians and religious leaders, who may manipulate congregational sermons to promote fundamentalism or sectarian conflict, thus sidelining social welfare objectives (Salamey & Othman, 2011).

This paper identifies what types of social welfare themes and which narrations about the *Ahlebait* are used commonly in Shia women's congregational sermons to promote social welfare. The limitation of this study is that

it does not provide quantitative and longitudinal evidence of the relationship between congregational attendance, content of sermons, and the relationship with types or extent of social welfare practices. The findings are based on interviews with five scholars and cannot be generalized. Such research would require statistical data on home-based and center-based religious centers across Shia regions and also sustained access to Shia women populations for data collection. It is recommended that further research is done to examine social work and social service activities of congregational social workers across other religions and sects of the world.

Implications for social work practice

Unless social work allows new solutions to deal with the current challenges of welfare and social change, the profession will lose its value and efficacy (Derezotes, 2009; Kwok, 2003). Religious congregational social workers are known to assist in wide social welfare initiatives such as feeding and providing shelter for the poor, literacy and training, collection and distribution of charity, and therapy and counseling (Ben Asher, 2001; Cnaan & Boddie, 2002; Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 1999). For Pakistan specifically, based on findings in this study and in recognition of regional and cultural issues, it is recommended that congregational social workers can further work for: (i) protection of disadvantaged populations, (ii) raising awareness for rights of women, (iii) education and employment of women, and (iv) commitment to charity and social services. There is scope for further work that can be done by congregational social workers to remove regressive cultural practices and religious fallacies against women, prevalent in Pakistan (Jami & Kamal, 2015; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001), such as (i) domestic and workplace violence, (ii) child and forced marriage, (iii) corporal punishment, (iv) son preference and differential treatment for girl children, and (v) removal of stigmas against marginalized groups such as special needs children and transgender individuals. Care must be taken however to use empathy in attempting to reform regressive, but traditionally accepted, ideologies and practices that are sustained in the name of religion (Knitter, 2010).

One of the mistakes that the formal social work profession can make is to neglect understanding their client's religious beliefs (Knitter, 2010). Unless there is recognition and understanding concerning the religious beliefs and values of the client, it would be difficult for social workers to assist them in a more holistic manner (Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004). It is recommended that professional social workers partner with congregational social workers to establish an interconnected social welfare network in society. The training and education of professional social workers in Pakistan must include religious congregations as part of their field research

and field education experience. This way student social workers, and professionals taking ongoing training, can become more cognizant and culturally aware of the religious needs and affiliation of their diverse client base across society. Knowledge about congregational social work will also help develop curriculum and pedagogy for the expansion and increased efficacy of the social work profession overall.

Notes

1. The *Ahlebait* is a term used to refer to the family of the Prophet Muhammad from the descendants of his daughter Hazrat Fatima.
2. Hazrat is a prefix that is used to denote honor and respect.
3. Participants of the study mentioned delivering sermons to Pakistani populations living abroad including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Kuwait.
4. *Fiqa-e-Jaffriya* is the largest sect of Shia Islam. This sect follows the traditions and jurisprudence of the 12 descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, from the lineage of his daughter Hazrat Fatima.
5. An *Imambargah* is a Shia mosque, also known for holding mourning and remembrance assemblies for the martyrs of the Prophet Muhammad's family.
6. Some of the elderly companions who fought for the protection of the *Ahlebait* in the battle of Kerbala, despite their advanced age and infirmity, included Muslim ibn Awsaja al-Asadi, Habib ibn Madhahir, and Burayr ibn Khuzayr al-Hamadani.
7. The Mehdi is perceived by Shias to be one of the *Ahlebait*, currently in occultation, who will return to the world to spread justice and equality.
8. There are three main taxes paid by Shias: (i) *Zakat*- which is a compulsory tax consisting of 2.5% of the total savings, (ii) *Sadaqah*- which is a voluntary charity of any amount and can also constitute payment in kind (like clothes and food), and (iii) *Khums*- which is a compulsory tax consisting of one-fifth of total wealth.
9. *Syed* members of the community are not permitted to use *Sadaqah*; however, they can use *Khums*.
10. *Syed* refers to people who can trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad.
11. The *Majalis* system and other religious congregations require a lot of informal and unpaid assistance in diverse occupations of cleaning, management, maintenance, planning, cooking, and security.

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