

Religious Culture and Agency: Exploring the Impact of the *Majlis* on Shi'a Women Community in Islamabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how religious culture impacts the lifestyle and identities of Shi'a Muslim women in a particular sector of Islamabad, Pakistan. The current research explores the ritualistic activities of the respondent group and their impact on women's empowerment and agency, hence contributing to triggering a ripple effect in exploring the rituals and experiences of the Shi'a communities at a broader level. Using Theodore Roosevelt Malloch's theory, this research revealed that their faith-based activities have significantly contributed to empowering them at communal as well as individual levels. The existing spiritual capital nourished their social and human capitals, making them agents of freedom and empowerment. Their commitment to ritualistic activities played an essential role in empowerment, contributing to the development of faith-based economies and faith-based skills. The respondents of this study reported various forms of skills and abilities that they earned through their spiritual capital—hence, the study concluded that human and social capitals were complemented by the spiritual capital of Shi'a women of the G-11 community.

Keywords: Religion; Household-based Majlis; Spiritual Capital; Agency; Qualitative; Pakistan.

Introduction

The *Majlis*, or the gathering, has long been the visage of the Shi'a sect in Islamic history. Before the advent of Islam, and during the days when it was mounting towards its zenith under the Prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Arabs used to gather using two main projecting tools—oratory, and the *minbar* or pulpit. The roots of the contemporary tradition of the *Majalis* (plural for *majlis*) can be traced back to the Abbasid era, initiated by Imam Jafar Sadiq. However, Lady Zainab, Lady Umm ul Baneen, and Hazrat Zain ul Abideen were the first ones to have set the tradition of organizing sermons and gatherings to spread the message of Karbala¹ (Howarth, 2005). Contemporarily, the Shi'a traditional ritual of the *Majlis* helps in the construction of identities and framing of the cognitions of the participant

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¹ The incident that took place in 680 in the city of Karbala, Iraq, when Imam Hussain a.s (the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was martyred by the Ummayyads.

women, including their decision-making, health, social connectedness, and marriage and divorce-related matters (Greenberg, Haddonfield, & NJ, 2007).

This article will sequence the study as follows: the following section will introduce the rituals of the Shi'a faith through literature, how they were transmitted from Iran to South Asia (and eventually Pakistan), and their impact on identity synthesis, gender dynamics, and overall promotion of agency through review of the literature. It will also briefly introduce the concept of spiritual capital as studied by Malloch (2010). This section is followed by this research's aims, theoretical framework, and study methodology, further leading to the results section. Finally, the discussion relates to the literature, which is followed by the concluding section.

Literature Review

Agency through Shi'a Rituals in Iran, India, and Pakistan

The ritualistic practices of the Shi'as primarily center upon the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and the tragic event of Karbala (Khalili, 2016). In Iran, the mourning processions feature Shi'as who beat their chests, those who lash their backs with blades or the *zanjeerzanan*, those carrying flags or the *alamdaran*, and those who chant to lament on the tragedy of Karbala through eulogizing poetry (Dabashi, 2011). Other prominent Shi'a rituals include the *Majalis*, narration of the episodes of Karbala, processions aimed to publicly mourn, beating of the chest and striking or flagellating of self (*matam*), and elegizing the tragedy of Karbala (Elbadri, 2009). In contemporary Iran, religious dramas, the *taziya*, are practiced to remember the tragic episodes of Karbala usually organized in the first ten days of the first Islamic month of Muharram (Mahani, 2013).

In the case of South Asia, specifically India, the split of the Bahmani Dynasty in the sixteenth century led to the birth of five smaller dynasties. Two of these five dynasties were purely Shi'a in their doctrines and declared Shi'ism as the state religion, namely, the Adil Shahi Kingdom of Bijapur, and the Qutb Shahi dynasty of Golconda. Where the former adopted Safavid doctrines of Shi'a Islam, the Qutb Shahis had a unique approach to maintaining the state's religious identity— 'Indianisation of Shi'a Rituals'. Some examples of such localization of the rituals include the composition of the elegiac poetries in the cultural Indian *Raag* tunes, i.e., *marisyas*, and the re-enactment of the wedding of Imam Hussain's daughter and his brother—Imam Hassan's son, Qasim, by inculcating the cultural tinge of preparing *mehndi*, or henna (Howarth, 2005). Syed Akbar Hyder (2006) describes his experiences while spending his childhood in Hyderabad, India. Everyone participates in the preparation of *alams*² wearing black clothes. They use red threads to protect themselves from bad omens by touching them with the *alam*. Special arenas designed to conduct mourning gatherings are named *ashurkhanas*, aromatized with fragrances of roses and burning *agar battis* (scented sticks). In Hyderabad, *Majalis* are set up almost every Thursday evening (Hyder, 2006).

Shedding light on India's analogous South Asian land, Shi'a rituals are heavily concentrated with numerous diverse activities in Pakistan. Shi'a mourning gatherings are held throughout the month of Muharram in *Imambargahs* —centers to conduct *Majlis*. The first ten days of Muharram are engraved with rituals of *matam*, elegiac lamentation, flagellation, presentation of henna as a symbol of Qasim's wedding in Karbala, Lady³ Sakina's mournful chants (*nohay*), exposition of *alam*, fast-breaking in the afternoon, and memorializing *Sham e Ghariban*⁴ in honor of the martyrs of Karbala. Many rituals practiced in Pakistan are the reflections of the Indianized rituals, as Kamran Scot Aghaie (2005) in his book mentions the description of an *Imambargah* named *Zaynbiyyah*, owned by a woman who migrated from North India, and hence the gatherings held were patterned with the Lucknow gatherings (Aghaie, 2005). Similarly, in Peshawar, the Indian Shi'ism in contrast to the local Qazalbash Shi'ism, is much

² Iconic flags of the martyrs of Karbala.

³ Urdu for 'the Lady'.

⁴ Translation: Evening of the poor; the night of 10th Muharram.

stricter and more dramatic, which diffused to Pakistan through the emigrants from India (Hegland, 1998a).

Practices and rituals of re-enacting and memorializing the tragic episodes of Karbala have been an iconic element of the South Asian Shi'a faith, and if further narrowed down, Indian and Pakistani Shi'a faiths. The cultural construction of gender dynamics in the Shi'a communities of the South Asian lands highly vests in the emblematic figures of Karbala, most eminently Lady Zainab among the women. While bringing Imam Hussain's message to light by confronting the tyrannical ruler of the time—Yazid—the silence of the whole crowd in front of Lady Zainab's speech remains exceptional. Despite all the physical injuries, her voice was pitched enough to echo outside the walls of the palace and the prison of Damascus. The customs of *Majalis*, set by her, still live on. The projection of Lady Zainab's identity onto the sentiments and cultures of the twentieth century is substantiated through Urdu literature. Poets like Iftikhar Arif, Parvin Shakir, and Wahid Akhtar have composed the sufferings and tales of the expression of patience and vigor of Lady Zainab in the form of eulogistic poetry. They contend that women have an integral role that requires a warrior's weapons of oratory and patience, rather than materialistic weapons. From a bird's eye, the standard Shi'a faith symbolizes the members of the household of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the ideal path to attain salvation. Ayatollah Khomeini and other Iranian clerical staff spread the notion that the most virtuous women are those who raise and give birth to their children for the promotion of the cause of the Prophet (PBUH) and his community. The ideal and iconic image among the saintly Shi'a women is that of Lady Fatima Zahra, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the wife of Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib, and the mother of Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain. Her stature makes her one of the most eminent insignia in the Shi'a faith (Aghaie, 2005). The image of Lady Fatima is also linked with the concept of woman's freedom in Islam, as she is the sole inheritor of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) values. She is also seen as the responsible child of her father, who is always there to comfort him during his heavy times of carrying the divine weight on his shoulders. From this aspect, Lady Fatima is given the name of *Umm e Abiha*—the mother of her father (Shariati, 1980).

These traditions and events have led to the contemporary rituals of the Shi'a faith, the face of which are such faith-based gatherings. According to Hegland (1998a), the *Majalis* not only enable the Shi'a to construct their ethnic identities but also to shape their gender dynamics. In Peshawar, the Shi'a extended their way of rituals, their construction of religious views, and their language 'Urdu', to unify their community. These women also regulated the practice of mourning gatherings consistent with their gendered purpose and interests (Hegland, 1998a). Participation and regular attendance were found to be as valuable as any sanctified text. Organizing *majalis* promoted leadership skills, the chest-beating ritual became a defiance of male dominance, and a break from domestic responsibilities gave them a sense of empowerment through mobility (Hegland, 1998b).

These gatherings often provided them with a platform for gossiping and social interaction, and a fraction of time outside the domestic confinements; immensely contributed to their confidence-building through performing and chanting in a crowd; presented with opportunities to make fame in their communities as chanters or organizers, and gave a chance to exhibit lenience in observing *pardah*⁵. Women began to train and teach their daughters according to the decorum of the gatherings at younger ages; mothers taught their daughters' unique styles of singing hymns. Holding and organizing gatherings at their place were sensed as a sign of great prestige (Hegland, 1997, Chapter 10, pp. 1-18).

Talking about what *spiritual capital* refers to, it comes into existence through one's relation with God and divinity. Actions that involve devotion and sincerity to God give birth to a certain kind of knowledge of how to deal with uncertain situations and perplexities in human lives. This *practical knowledge* has helped organizations stand on morality and enhance their existing human and social capital (Malloch, 2010).

⁵The Islamic practice of maintaining a line of privacy between a male and female, who are not legally or religiously bonded in a formal relationship.

Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

Pakistan's Muslim population comprises 10-15% Shi'a sect, rendering it a minority in the country (The World Factbook, 2021). This study explores the ritualistic activities of this minority group within a specific area, and their impact on women's empowerment and agency. There is less evidence on this topic within Pakistan, and no studies specific to the capital of the country, Islamabad. This study will contribute to triggering a ripple effect in exploring the rituals and experiences of the Shi'a communities of Pakistan in the current times, and what role these rituals play in their agency.

Aim of the Study

The present study aims to explore how the religious culture of a specific Shi'a community in a local sector of Islamabad empowers the participant women at the individual- and community levels; and how they establish for themselves a *spiritual capital* through their ritualistic traditions. It aims to explore how house-based women *majalis* have contributed to maintaining social cohesion, interaction, networking, and enhanced agency through their communal spiritual capital.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research has been adopted from the theory given by Theodore Roosevelt Malloch in his study about spiritual capital and practical wisdom. He argues how spiritual capital or the moral virtues that are prevailing in a person's life contribute towards the development of practical wisdom he/she may achieve. According to Malloch (2010), the spiritual capital comprises three categories of virtues, namely Faith, Courage, and Forgiveness. Faith is the trust and the allegiance to the duty to God and one's promises.

Courage is described by the moral and spiritual threshold and resisting the capacity of a person to bear the calamities and problems that strike with a full blow.

The third virtue is Forgiveness. The person can forget the mistakes of others and not claim to take revenge from the one who has intentionally or unintentionally committed a mistake. These three virtues that make up the spiritual capital result in enhancing the moral life of a person and the people around, them, and develop the practical wisdom needed to achieve material and worldly success (Malloch, 2010) — consequently empowering those who possess these virtues. This theory has been applied to this study as a conceptual framework.

Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework*



Through this model, it can be argued that spiritual capital leads to the development of faith, courage, and forgiveness in one's self. From this point of view, courage can be used as a dimension that leads to the empowerment and agency of a community or individual, in this case, Shi'a women of the target community.

Methodology

Design

Being exploratory research, qualitative methodology was applied with the case study approach as it aimed to explore the experiences of the Shi'a community of a local sector (G-11) of Islamabad. The data was collected through the semi-structured interview method. The attendees were informed about the nature and objectives of the research, to which they cooperatively responded and helped in acquiring the data. This helped in building rapport as well as obtaining verbal informed consent. The participants were interviewed according to their convenience of time and space. This study ensures the inclusion of the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ) (Appendix 2).

Setting and Participants

The study took place in local sub-sectors (G-11/1 and G-11/2) of Islamabad. The women of the Shi'a community have their setting in these sub-sectors, where they were approached to explore their experiences. The sector has a central *Imambargah* in G-11/2, named *Bargah-e-Umm-e-Kulsoom*, where most of the interviews were conducted in *Urdu* for the participants' convenience (some interviews were conducted at their homes). The non-probabilistic method was used to purposefully select respondents from three age brackets belonging to two categories, the Organizers and the Attendees, to obtain diverse perspectives. Inclusion criteria required the respondents to belong to the Shi'a community residing in the G-11 sector, specifically G-11/1 and G-11/2. The participants were approached through a Key Informant belonging to the same community, who helped the researcher to connect with the respondents and introduce the aim and objectives of the study. A total of 20 respondents were approached for interviews; however, only 10 participated in the study. At least two respondents from each age bracket were selected for interviews (6 respondents of 31-50 years of age; 2 respondents each from the remaining two brackets). Table 1 presents the detailed participants' demographics.

Data Collection and Analysis

An interview guide was formulated with the help of the literature and theoretical framework by SEK (Appendix 1). The questions were pilot tested with 3 of the respondents; this data was included in the final data analysis. Before the start of each interview, basic demographics (age, sector, category, and status) were also collected from the respondents. The interview duration for each participant was 30-60 minutes (no repeat interviews were conducted). All interviews were conducted by FH using an audio recorder and field diary, while the thematic analysis was done by FH, SEK, and MH to code all the interviews manually. The discrepancy in coding was addressed by mutual consensus between all the authors. The final nodes were used as the framework to code the remaining transcripts while emerging nodes were included simultaneously. Finally, the nodes were organized into larger themes. To check for data saturation, analysis was done alongside data collection; in this study, saturation was achieved between the 9th and 10th interviews as the respondents belonged to a specific community.

Table 1: *Participants' Demographics*

Participant Code	Age Bracket	Category	Sector	Status
A1	18-30	Attendee	G-11/2	Student
A2	18-30	Attendee	G-11/1	Student
A3	18-30	Attendee	G-11/2	Housewife
A4	18-30	Attendee	G-11/2	Student
O1	31-50	Organizer	G-11/1	School teacher
O2	31-50	Organizer	G-11/2	Housewife
O3	31-50	Organizer	G-11/2	Housewife
A5	31-50	Attendee	G-11/2	Housewife
O4	51-70	Organizer	G-11/1	Housewife
A6	51-70	Attendee	G-11/1	Housewife

Findings

The data collected through interviews are presented in this section. To keep the respondents' identities confidential, they have been mentioned with participant codes.

Agency

The *Majalis* in the target locale—held occasionally throughout the year at different Islamic events—contributed sufficiently to the agency of the community's women. The women were freely mobile to come and attend the *Majlis* and then return to their homes. Even if they had other important domestic engagements, they actively participated in matters relating to the *Majalis*. Some of them had the liberty of owning a car primarily for this purpose. Usually, they were not allowed by their male family members—fathers or husbands to visit places without their company, however, they were free to do so for ritualistic purposes. They would drive to the *Majlis* and offer services of pick and drop to other women who had no modes of conveyance. A majority of the respondents were mere housewives; amid their domestic duties, the *Majalis* provided them with a chance to become agents of freedom and self-identity. Many of the women had learned to drive solely for the reason to attend the *Majalis* and become independent of the reliance upon their male family members. The women were allowed to stay late for *Majlis* purposes only; it became the vent through which they could breathe the air of freedom and agency and could have a break from the monotony of life.

Majlis—A secure platform for marriage

Ritualistic platforms of *Majalis* have been a helpful platform for women to tackle their worries of marrying off their young daughters and sons to well-known families. While meeting the criteria of being both a Shi'a and a Syed⁶, it is easier to find the perfect match in these gatherings. As most of the women participating in the gathering belonged to the same community, those looking for relationships were satisfied regarding their biographical profiles.

Translation:

When you search for a girl (for marriage), you have to search for her whereabouts, and whether she is a Shi'a as well as a Syed or not. These matters are resolved here. (O1)

An older woman, who was an Organizer of the gathering, also talked about how the gatherings led a newly married toward a well-settled life:

All of them are Shi'a and Syed(s). My husband knew about them, so he inquired about them. A woman here knew about them and said that they were very good people. We also investigated them. The girls don't have parents, so now we are their parents. Thank God we did Istakhara⁷ as well. Her husband is nice. They are well and happy and live comfortably now. (O2)

The woman performed the role of a mediator between families looking for matrimonial relationships. Despite her growing age, the respondent continued to connect people and families for the cause. Women who were in search of spouses for their daughters or sons would contact her to search during the days of the *Majalis*.

Translation(s):

I look for suitable families for marital affairs when people tell me that they have daughters. I would go for this task by myself during the days I feel healthy; but with the growing weakness, I only introduce them to the girls for selection who are ready for commitments during the Majlis in the month of Muharram. I do not like going places, having tea, and rejecting marriage requests in the end. Therefore, I recommend they come to the Majlis for this purpose. (O2)

⁶ Caste connecting with the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through blood lineage.

⁷ A prayer recited by the Muslims when they are not sure about a decision or want to have a solution about a dispute not getting solved.

Majlis is an effective medium among Ahl-e-Tashai⁸ for girls who reach the age of marriage; it eliminates the need to visit various places. The trend of visiting tens of houses and rejecting the girl as per your choice prevails in our society. Instead of this trend, Majlis is an orderly setting where some people search for girls while others look for boys. Hence, they get to know who they like well easily. (O1)

During the Islamic months of Muharram, Safar, and Rabbi-ul-Awwal, the women would only meet and dig out the essentials of the family. If they found a suitable relationship to get in, they would give their word and agree to it. Later on, the two families would visit each other to get the formalities done and begin preparations for the marriage.

We don't do these things during these days of sorrow, but it is clear in our minds whom we liked and which family she belonged to. (O1)

Majlis as a 'divine antidote'

The medium of *Majalis* had a healing effect on the women's physical and mental health. Their lifestyles and the pressure of their domestic responsibilities loaded their nerves; *Majalis* acted as the rare drops of rain that seeped through a drought-stricken land. Women often attended the *Majalis* to regain their mindfulness, calm their stressed-out minds, and have a break from their hectic and monotonous routines.

Translation(s):

Mood swing is a real effect that every individual goes through during events and happenings in his/her life. At times you get angry at your children. When you come out of the shell for a while and sit in the Majlis, you experience an inner satisfaction as if you were sitting on a 'floor of comfort'. That particular moment makes you oblivious to all the perplexities in your life. Forgetting about all the knots at my home consistently happens with me whenever I come here, and then I come up with everything with a new enthusiasm upon reaching back home. (A5)

Women would regard the *Majlis* as the 'divine gathering'—a reason for their well-being. For instance, an Attendee who was also an orator said during her sermon:

I was bedridden till yesterday, yet I am unaware of how I arrived here today. (A3)

With mental relief, the gathering brought spiritual elation and healing to all the attendees. *Majalis* provided deep and intrinsic satisfaction to the hearts and souls of the women. They believed that *Majlis* has a divine purpose: attaining the satisfaction of the family of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Attending or organizing a *Majlis* aromatized their minds and bodies with inner peace. It was believed that only those women would get the chance to attend the *Majlis* who were divinely approved by the Lady Fatima Zahra; she listened to those who would come to commemorate and cry over the tragedies of her son. Hence, the women tried to ensure their attendance in most of the gatherings and stay grateful to God for having the chance to attend this religious gathering regularly.

We attain the satisfaction that Mola⁹ had considered us eligible enough to remember them and execute the task that they had assigned to us. Otherwise, we were not worthy enough to perform such a divine duty. (A1)

The respondent also explained how her worries and stress regarding her nearing marriage were countered by the spiritual support she was receiving from the gatherings:

I am tense about my nearing wedding, and there are no preparations yet due to the month of Muharram. But my father and I believe that Mola will make it happen and resolve all the financial or social obstacles that come in between. (A1)

⁸ A formal term used to mention Shi'a believers.

⁹ Urdu for 'Lord'—in this context the household of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

Majalis acted as a mechanism for the women to counter daily challenges; they believed that most of their problems get solved when they perform a ritual with sincerity and loyalty in honor of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his household.

Deducing from the response of another respondent, it was evident that the gatherings provided her with spiritual satisfaction and strength in her faith:

The satisfaction and purification of the soul are not possible elsewhere than the Majlis. We shun the impure thoughts and activities that we normally perform at our homes. The more we come to the Majlis, the better we learn about right and wrong. We feel like different beings when we are away from worldly activities. (A3)

The engagement in the activities of the *Majalis* was considered to be a “divine engagement”, which led to the purification and chastity of the spirit. Thus, the spiritual capital led to self-actualization and self-motivation of the women in this community, prompting them to move on regardless of the obstacles they faced in their lives.

Academic Education

Girls who studied in schools, colleges, or universities profoundly contended that attending and participating in *Majalis* would produce better results in their academics. They participated as orators, *noha khuwan*, and *marsiya khuwan*, adding to their confidence in achieving higher grades with the belief that *Mola* will help them in academics as a reward for their devotion. Interestingly, where their preparatory class timings clashed with those of the *Majlis*, they preferred to attend the *Majlis*.

Translation(s):

We come with the intention that we will forward our sorrows to Lady¹⁰ and all the problems in our lives will get solved, including the examinations. We study and manage everything simultaneously, reciting and attending school. But if the schedules of the Majlis and the papers clash, we always prefer Majlis over the papers. We have the intentions that the Lady will help us out. We have never left the Majlis for our papers and yet have always scored good marks. (A1)

It is a common experience during our papers that I recite in the Lady's Majlis and she helps us. I had my Sociology exam; I asked her if I may score passing marks only, yet I scored seventy marks. A miracle had happened, and Hazrat Abbas helped me out. (A4)

A young orator enrolled in a university explained about her last semester and how her faith motivated her to pass it.

It was my last semester; I asked the Leader of the Faithful¹¹ that I will recite the name of Ali all my life and that he may please get me through this only. I asked Mola you are the door of the Knowledge; you will save me; you will save me. (A2)

The strength in faith and trust in divine beings enhanced to a superlative degree when the young girls succeeded in their academic lives. The rituals and participation in the *Majlis* motivated them to perform even better than before, and to deem their worldly achievements as the result of their zealous participation in ritualistic activities.

Social Cohesion

The series of *Majalis* had been a strong catalyst in promoting social harmony and cohesion among the women of this community. The women who actively attended the *Majalis* met with each other regularly and learned more about the recent happenings in everyone's lives. Above all, when they came together with a common purpose, they interacted with a stronger enthusiasm to learn from the lives of these devout figures. Through this channel, they were able to help any member of the community who was in a dire

¹⁰ Referring to Lady Fatima and Lady Zainab.

¹¹ Referring to Hazrat Ali.

need of help. They had social and moral support to offer, if not monetary. The roots of this network were traced in the *Majalis* that extended well beyond the religious gatherings.

Ab ham family ki tarha hogaye hain, aik group me akay. Pehle aik doosre ko jantay nahi they

Translation:

Where we did not even know each other, we have become a family now after forming this group.
(A3)

An account of enhanced social interactions is that they get to meet their family members or relatives they haven't seen for years.

Through the Majlis, we meet those whom we didn't know earlier and our long-distance families as well. It is a proficient channel for us to share our happiness and sorrows in this busy era. (O1)

Regularly reciting hymns and delivering sermons played a vital role in constructing their social identities and networks in the local community. A symbiotic relationship between the orators and the organizers had been developed when the organizers invited the same orators repeatedly for the sermons at the gatherings they were hosting. The 'religious symbioses' accounted for an association that extends for a lifetime and even across generations.

Skill Development and Technological Exposure

The skillset of the women was heavily enhanced due to their commitment to the *Majlis*. Their involvement in organizing the *Majlis*, the dedication to deliver their best in innovative ways, the rituals that they performed—most specifically *noha khuwani*, *marsiya khuwani*, and the oratory—all contributed to their empowerment by adding to their "faith-based skills" or "devotional skills". Many women realized the by-product of their active participation in the form of these skills; hence, they made use of them in their professional and daily lives. In this way, spiritual capital led to the formation and/or enhancement of human capital. In the form of effective management and organization skills, social interaction skills, enhanced vocals, and rhythm in daily routines, *Majlis* played the role of icing on the cake while equipping the women with an extra set of expertise and skills. With the help of the human capital that they have developed within, they were able to walk ahead and cater to the challenges they encountered as soon as they stepped into the corporate world.

A respondent talked about how the skills she had gained from organizing *Majalis* helped in her professional domain:

Translation(s):

We also get to know how good managers we are. How efficiently we can organize something or where we could improve ourselves in the upcoming events. We gain experience in how to manage an event professionally. (O1)

While delineating the contribution of *Majlis*-activities in enhancing her social skills and adding laboriously to her social capital, she said,

It helps in developing our social contacts, improving our social relations, and interacting with people. Majlis helps you to learn how to deal with and communicate with people with different personalities. We do not face abrupt problems in our social life later on, as we are confident enough to deal with the risk of miscommunication that we have experienced while dealing with a diverse crowd in Majlis. (O1)

Another respondent, while explaining her point of view, said

Mola has advised to 'either stay silent or say what is better than the silence'. I have side vocalists; both have differing natures. I avoid saying anything that would annoy them or with which they wouldn't agree. In the matter of Majalis, I would have a differing opinion from others, yet I stay tolerant. (A3)

Apart from the professional and social skills that the women mastered in, there were other areas where they gained experience and practice. For instance, the ritual of *noha khuwani* and *marsiya khuwani* required a lot of vocal practice before the *Majlis*. The girls would gather at a commonplace, especially for this purpose. A group of young girls that were invited to recite the melancholic and lamenting chants in the *Majlis* was interviewed. They told the researcher about their scheduled classes in which they would practice the recitations of *nohas*.

Meelads¹² and Majalis are held every month. The classes are arranged in the houses for practicing the Noha recitation. We listen to the Noha, write it down, and then everyone recites it together. Auntie composes the tunes; anyone who picks it up tells others how to take the notes high and low. It is exactly the way we prepare for our exams. Practice comes first. (A2)

When asked about her experience of reciting chants at the *Majalis*, another reciter expressed how it contributed to widening her vocal skills and having a stronger grip over their vocals. The *Majlis* became the primary platform where the voices of these young girls were notably enhanced.

Moreover, women made sufficient use of technology to organize and communicate with their fellow members. The arrangements of the gatherings were mostly done by women only, during which they learned how to operate professional microphones and sound systems. Communication regarding faith-based practices also made them active on social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

Expression of the 'self'

Women were able to express their opinions and feelings verbally and non-verbally during the *Majalis*. Whenever they would talk with other women about their domestic responsibilities, they felt relieved of the melancholy residing inside of them. When they would feel low and blue, they often came to attend the *Majalis* to gain spiritual ecstasy and moral support from the rest of the women. Interaction with their social groups made them more expressive about their feelings.

On the other hand, the rituals they performed acted as the best modes of communication to exhibit the empowerment they experienced in a *Majlis* in a non-verbal manner. During the ritual of *matam* particularly, women were more capable of expressing themselves non-verbally as they let their veils fall and beat their chests within a closed circle of women in a masculine manner. The way they moved in a rhythmic and coordinating style delineated the gesture of empowerment that had seeped within them through the activities of *Majalis*. The tasks they performed within women's *Majlis* were consistent with those performed by men outside these halls. The arrangements of the house, movement of furniture, contacting the outdoor services, and gaining independence in mobility are instances of such gendered tasks. Raising slogans in a coarse voice, singing chants and melancholic hymns with practice, and freely beating their chests with force without maintaining the standard *purdah* in the hall, were examples of women empowerment and gender dynamics noted within this female-centric environment.

Networking

Women became pros and experts in creating and maintaining a network within their local community. They made use of technology and social media to bind the community at a common platform and maintain contact with everyone. They used social media to deliver important bulletins regarding any community member or the schedule of any upcoming *Majalis*. Other than *Majlis* updates, the women randomly networked with each other in the group. Stories about their lives, pictures of other events, and casual chats were common among them even if they were not otherwise personally acquainted—another incident of the contribution of spiritual capital in enhancing their social capital. Their media group also updated the participants about the deaths in the community, so that everyone could pay their condolences to the family of the deceased. Important Islamic events were regularly posted to keep a track of all the dates associated with the revered figures and rituals. Women also used this medium to advertise or

¹²Gatherings organised at prosperous occasions, in contrast to the *Majalis*.

promote their economic activities within the community. When the months of mourning would end, women would make customized advertisements regarding their new packages for hair-styling and facial make-ups, thereby regulating their own 'faith-based economics'. The group became an online market where they could reach their customers in their community. Furthermore, women would offer tuition services for those interested in sending their children for education. In this way, women of the local Shi'a community interacted and socialized with each other through a closed network.

Islamic Figures as Role Models

Another aspect of the *majalis*, which empowered these women from a social, religious, and cultural point of view at community and domestic levels, was the idealization of the Islamic figures. According to the respondents, the female members of the family of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are considered emblematic figures by the Shi'a communities; they are followed as the principal path in all spheres of life. For instance, the lives of Lady Fatima and Lady Zainab are like open books; exemplary for women of every era, demonstrating how to walk through the violence and tyranny prevailing in the modern world. Where Hazrat Ali, Hazrat Abbas, and Hazrat Hussain stand for 'heroism through martyrdom' in the Shi'a faith, the women of their households are seen as ideals by the Shi'a women. The examples of Lady Fatima Zahra and Lady Zainab played a crucial role in the decision-making mechanisms for the women in the case of the G-11 community. The incidents of Lady Zainab, fighting for her rights through her sermons even in a time of mass oppression and tyrannical rule of Yazid, brought striking and influential waves of hope and strength in their lives.

Translation(s):

We talk about Lady Zainab and Lady Fatima Zahra as exemplary women. Rather, the life of every family member of the Prophet (PBUH) should be enough for us. Unfortunately, we fail to live the way they lived, but even trying shall contribute as a drop to eventually become an ocean. Initially, I possessed several ill habits. But staying away from home for 5 long years made me realize the pain that the family of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) must have gone through. Only if we read about them and their morals will we be able to rise as well as inspire others. (A5)

Talking about the rights of women in Islam, the respondent quoted the example of Lady Fatima Zahra as the embodiment of valor for women who wanted to speak up for their rights and live a life encompassing all spheres of success. From being a wife and a mother to a rights activist, her lifestyle becomes the epitome of perfection for Shi'a women.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his daughter spoke for women's rights fourteen hundred years ago. If you want to see an ideal wife, an emblematic nurturer, and a fighter, Lady Fatima Zahra is the source. She has delineated the importance of purdah that even her funeral was carried in the dark of the night. She has shown us through her example that the hijab should not be removed, nor should it become an obstacle in the way to success and triumph. Empowerment with hijaab is the key. Nowadays, women pursue all sorts of occupations while maintaining hijab, they go into aerobics, races, exercise, and gym. 'I am a woman, and this doesn't make me inferior', Lady Fatima has delivered this message to us. On the other hand, her daughter Lady Zainab delivered a sermon in a court where no one ever listened, yet the power of her oratory compelled every ear to listen to it. (A5)

During the sermon of the *majalis*, the orator would explicate the examples of their emblems, how they were involved in supporting and uplifting the heroic male figures of Islam, and that without Lady Zainab the message of Karbala was incomplete. The role of Lady Zainab was the most prominent during the sermon, mentioned as a brave and bold fighter in a swarm of hatred and oppression.

The women of Karbala have become the archetype of empowerment for the women of this era. Their attributes and historic contributions are often narrated in a manner that the women feel free to perform activities that are stereotypically tagged as the sole duties of male members of society. These ideals became the source of courage to forgive others in matters of dispute; for instance, a respondent quoted an

incident of her ignoring a taunt posed by another woman because she remembered one of *Mola's* sayings about the importance of silence in certain situations.

Table 2: *Summary of Analysis*

Theme	Summary of Experiences
Agency	Mobility without male company; Driving and owning a car; Break from the monotony of domestic responsibilities; Freedom and self-identity
Marriage	Easy platform to find matrimonial relationships within the required caste
Divine antidote	Healing effect on physical and mental health; Floor of comfort; Reason of wellbeing; Spiritual elation and satisfaction; Mechanism to counter daily-life challenges; Divine engagement leading to the purification and chastity of the spirit
Academic Education	Academic achievements as a result of devotion to participation in religious gatherings
Social Cohesion	Social and moral support to each other; Becoming a social family; A chance to meet long-distance friends and families after long gaps; Religious symbioses
Skill Development and Technological Exposure	Faith-based skills; Management and organization skills, social interaction skills, enhanced vocals, and rhythm in daily routines; handling technical instruments such as microphone and sound systems; using social media technology
Expression of the 'self'	Verbal expressions: talking with other women about domestic issues; Non-verbal expressions: the ritual of <i>matam</i> in a masculine manner, performing gendered tasks such as arrangements for gatherings and moving of furniture, defining gender dynamics differently through body language in rituals
Networking	Social media platform for networking; sharing of personal life events with other community members; updates about scheduled <i>majalis</i> ; faith-based economies
Islamic figures as 'Role Models'	Lady Fatima Zahra and Lady Zainab as emblems of empowerment; practical implications of life stories of religious ideals in the lives of Shi'a women such as raising their voice against tyranny, knowing about women's rights; Importance of women pursuing careers while maintaining <i>pardah</i>

Majlis, Capital Development, and Agency

In relevance to the theoretical framework applied to this research, Malloch (2010) categorizes Spiritual Capital into Faith, Courage, and Forgiveness, arising as a result of spiritual connectedness. Faith is an act of devotion to God as well as the trust developed by a person; in this case, women of the Shi'a community were found to be active in organizing and attending the *Majalis* to gain the divine satisfaction of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his family. Particularly those, who were more enthusiastic in the faith-based gatherings, had developed strong "faith networks" among the community. In academics, young girls believed their dedication to the rituals would help them pass with grace marks and flying colors as they recited the hymns to commemorate the tragedies of Karbala purely for the satisfaction of Lady Fatima—motivating them to pursue materialistic achievements based on religious commitments. This particular aspect of ritualistic commitment linked with better academic achievements is also consistent with the study conducted by Bano (2018, p. 11). As for the element of Courage, it is the mental and moral threshold of a person to withstand danger and calamity that may hit at any timeframe in life

(Malloch, 2010). The women of the Shi'a community of G-11 experienced this strength and courage in matters where they had to face financial, moral, or social difficulties. The women were spiritually and mentally firm about the notion that all of their matters related to life and responsibilities would be handled by the Lord or *Mola*, when they participated sincerely in a ritualistic activity. The women of the Shi'a community followed specific revered and pious figures in Islamic history; these ideals formed the basis of their concepts of being successful and empowered women. For them, "spiritual empowerment" came from the illustrations from the lives of Lady Fatima and Lady Zainab, and through adopting the methods that these ideals practiced to bring about empowerment in their lives. Lady Zainab is described, in the tragedy of Karbala, as the woman who held the position of her brothers after their martyrdom. The women came to the *Majalis* to learn from these examples; brought along their children to make them aware of these specific criteria of empowerment, different from the mainstream idea of monetary empowerment. For them, making themselves spiritually, morally, and socially empowered was the by-product of walking on the paths paved by these Islamic figures. Forgiving others and letting go of petty disputes was a characteristic that was found to have originated in the participant women as a result of the teachings of their Islamic role models.

Thus, it may be said that social, human, or financial capital may not be solely regarded as the determinants of an empowered network and the basis of a strong community. Spiritual capital also contributes to the enhancement of human and social capital. Interaction based on spiritual connections introduces unique skill sets within one's self, enriching the human capital. Similarly, a woman with no previous social contacts discovers her own social family, forming a functional social capital.

This study elucidates how women had transformed themselves into freely mobile beings, to carry forward and maintain the spiritual capital they had woven in the sector of G-11. Where they were not 'free enough' to experience autonomic movements, their religious culture of the *majlis* allowed them to practice the life of a mobilized and socially engaged woman. They were allowed to visit such gatherings without any restrictions and constraints; practiced free economic choices to spend for *Niaz* (food distributed for religious purposes), and social networks became stronger through tools such as WhatsApp groups and call systems. Their identities were shaped as the orators and reciters, providing them a chance to feel the agency of recognition. Organizing these gatherings at their places by themselves gave women a sense of pride and encouragement. These components of the study are similar to the study conducted by Hegland (1997, Chapter 10, pp. 1-18).

As women and young girls recited and delivered sermons on the platform of *Majlis*, they felt their skills had become sharper, such as a respondent mentioning the vocal enhancement due to recitation in *Majalis*. Furthermore, when the young girls saw the elder members of the community deliver sermons, many of them were attracted to learning, reading relevant books, and delivering sermons in their community by taking some important tips from the more experienced orators. When the women performed *matam*, they let go of their veils and scarves and expressed themselves in a way that they could not otherwise do in any other setting due to the gender dynamics of this society. They attended *majlis* to break the monotony of their hectic routines at home and were conscious about their regular attendance in the "divine gathering". As necessary as it would be to mention the significant works by Hegland (1998a), these ritualistic practices transform the widely understood meanings in a particular community in a way that is only considered to be a 'masculine' body gesture in the community, but which the women take advantage of practicing in a women-only Shi'a gathering.

Similarly, Mahani (2013) has well-elucidated in his book how Lady Zainab fights against tyranny by supporting her brothers' cause, and becomes an ideal for women through her sermons, as also found in this study.

All over social media, it has been very evident how the theology of Shi'ism empowers women in their lives, through the symbolization of the female figures standing against tyranny and violence after the battle of Karbala. The symbolized empowerment of the women of Karbala has set grounds for the

construction and development of the identity of a Shi'a woman. Not only those who were in Karbala but also Lady Fatima Zahra, who walked through the court to claim her rights according to the Shi'a theology. Women are often given examples of this quintessence to speak up for their rights in this era and live by the principles set by their religious ideals. Anyone not speaking up for their rights against the tyrannical rules is considered to be ignorant, which is the biggest blow to Islamic teachings, according to a *Majlis* documented on social media (Fanpage, 2018). Women are made self-sufficient and self-empowered to perform a task without relying on male members of society. To rectify the image of Islam represented in the religious globe today, i.e., a religion of bloodshed, the Shi'a women spread the message to stand up in society through the silent vocals of their characters. Women are brought out from the constructed shells of immodesty in the act of speaking up and presented with the examples of Lady Zainab who delivered sermons in the court of a violent ruler with her *Hijab* maintained.

Spiritual Capital and Women Empowerment—Spiritual Empowerment?

Although there are prominent role models and ideals among the male members of the family of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)—himself being the primary—the role of his female household members holds high contemporary importance, mainly due to the link between their sacrifices and the divine purpose of Islam. Before the Iranian Revolution, the same tragedy of Karbala had been used to portray a different picture of women's roles in society. They were illustrated as quiet, sorrowful, and compromising beings who were agents of tears and pain. The revolution of Iran brought about dynamism within the gender roles through a different illustration of the role of women in the tragedy of Karbala. Where Lady Zainab was a woman of tears and pain, the post-revolution period had exhibited her roles to be more sacrificial and anti-tyrannical. She became the agent of revolution in every woman's life in the Shi'a faith thereafter. Her sermons were symbolized as the language of strength, and her hunger was made the sword that fought against those hungry for power through oppression. The life stories of these ideals are now being explained on a grass-root level of Women Shi'a *Majalis*, where the examples of Lady Fatima Zahra and Lady Zainab provide moral and spiritual strength to every individual woman to fight against tyranny and oppression, and feel empowered by owning these figures who have decorated every aspect of their lives with the solutions to social and religious needs of the common woman today. The freedom experienced by these women through the ritual of household-level-*Majlis*—is not otherwise there, as most of these women live a life of mere housewives wholly dedicated to their domestic responsibilities.

Spiritual capital is a relatively more recent term than the social and human capital(s), but it is evident that spiritual capital acts as an important aspect that contributes to the formation of the other two—and this leads to 'empowerment'. Human capital encompasses the intangible resources of skills, abilities, experiences, training, and knowledge that cumulatively help an individual or a group achieve their goals (Huff, 2018). This study concludes that the Shi'a women community of the G-11 sector reported various forms of skills and abilities in the form of agency, ease in match-making, source of peace and healing, perceived improvement in academics, social cohesion, development of public dealing and networking skills, and exposure to technology. This shows that human and social capitals were complemented by the spiritual capital of Shi'a women of the G-11 community and that the role of Lady Zainab played an instrumental role in developing the identities and expressions of these women.

Study Limitations

The study focuses on a minority population of Pakistan; and within the minority group, the population of this study is a specific community residing in a local sector of Islamabad. As practices and experiences are highly subjective across areas and cultures, the experiences recorded in this study cannot be generalized to the Shi'a population across Pakistan. As there is little to no research relating to the experiences of Shi'a communities in Pakistan—particularly Islamabad—more studies are needed to explore the practices and their implications in the Shi'a faith. A literature gap was also observed during the research as most studies revealed the agency led by the *majlis*. Moreover, the findings of this study

highlight the strengths of this particular ritual in Islamic society; hence, more studies should be conducted to explore both strengths and weaknesses that may be prevailing in this context.

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Conflict of Interest


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Appendix 1

The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ) checklist

No. Item	Guide questions/description	Remarks	Page no.
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity			
Personal Characteristics			
1. Interviewer/facilitator	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	FH conducted the semi-structured interviews.	6
2. Credentials	What were the researcher's credentials? E.g., PhD, MD	The researchers' credentials are as follows: FH: MPhil SEK: PhD MH: MS Scholar	20
3. Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	FH: Student/researcher SEK: Academician/researcher MH: Student/researcher	20
4. Gender	Was the researcher male or female?	The researchers' genders are as follows: FH: female SEK: male MH: female	20
5. Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher have?	SEK has attended various workshops and training in the field of research, including Mixed Method Writing, and Scientific Research Writing by the University of Leeds, UK. FH and MH went through rigorous field research experience before the conception of this research during coursework of her academic degree. All the authors are experienced qualitative researchers and have conducted and published multiple qualitative and quantitative studies.	20
Relationship with participants			
6. Relationship established	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	Solely for the purpose of the research.	N/A
7. Participant knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g., personal goals, reasons for doing the research	Some of the participants knew FH personally. However, all the participants knew that the interviews being conducted will be used for research purposes.	N/A
8. Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the inter viewer/facilitator? e.g., Bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic	The characteristics and authors' information have been separately reported in the section titled "Authors' information" at the end of the manuscript.	20
Domain 2: Study design			

Theoretical framework			
9. Methodological orientation and Theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g., grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis	Case study approach and thematic analysis were applied.	5
Participant selection			
10. Sampling	How were participants selected? e.g., purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball	Participants were selected through purposive (non-probabilistic) sampling technique.	6
11. Method of approach	How were participants approached? e.g., face-to-face, telephone, mail, email	Participants were approached through a Key Informant (KI) from the community. FH knew the KI personally; the KI facilitated the interviewer to connect with the participants.	6
12. Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	Data was collected from 10 participants.	6
13. non-participation	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	20 participants were approached, out of which only 10 participated. The reason to not participate was their busy schedule.	6
Setting			
14. Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected? e.g., home, clinic, workplace	Some of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, while most at the <i>Imambargah</i> .	5
15. Presence of non-participants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	No.	N/A
16. Description of sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g., demographic data, date	The important characteristics were their age bracket, status, sector they lived in, and whether they were the organizer or the attendee.	6
Data collection			
17. Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	Interview guide was prepared (Appendix 2) and shown to the participants before start of the interview. The IG was pilot-tested with 3 respondents.	6
18. Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	No.	6
19. Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	The interviews were recorded through an audio recorder after acquiring the participants' consent.	6
20. Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	Yes.	6
21. Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus group?	30-60 minutes per interview.	6
22. Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	Yes.	6

23. Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	No.	N/A
Domain 3: analysis and findings			
Data analysis			
24. Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	FH, SEK, and MH coded the data.	6
25. Description of the coding tree	Did authors provide a description of the coding tree?	The thematic analysis was done by FH, SEK, and MH to code all the interviews manually. The discrepancy in coding was addressed by mutual consensus between the authors. The final nodes were used as the framework to code remaining transcripts, while emerging nodes were included simultaneously. Finally, the nodes were organized into larger themes.	6
26. Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	Themes were derived from the data.	6
27. Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	The data was managed and analysed manually.	6
28. Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	No.	N/A
Reporting			
29. Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number	Yes, verbatim are mentioned to support the themes presented in the study, and identified by participant codes.	7-15
30. Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes.	7-15
31. Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	Yes.	7-15
32. Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes?	No.	N/A

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

	Questions	Prompts
1.	Does the <i>majlis</i> contribute in your empowerment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If yes, how? - In your opinion, what skills have you polished through this <i>majlis</i>?
2.	How do you feel when you attend the <i>majlis</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How does the <i>majlis</i> facilitate you in real-life matters/situations?
3.	What is your local network in the community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you interact in this network? - How does your local network operate?
4.	What is your medium of communication to spread the message?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If social media, who administers it? - Which applications are mostly used, WhatsApp, Facebook etc.? - Is everyone a part of the social media platform? If not, how do you reach out to those who are not the participants of the social groups?
5.	How do you commute to and from the venue?	
6.	What role does the <i>majlis</i> play in self-expression, and how?	
7.	What type of material do you use for the preparations of the <i>majlis</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why do you aromatize the room? What is the satisfaction behind it? - Are special banners and flyers hung in the room for the <i>majlis</i>? If yes, what messages do the banners carry? - Do you arrange special chairs or floor cushions for the elder fraction of the community?
8.	What is the role of your religious figures in your identity and empowerment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do these religious figures contribute to your personal, social, moral, and spiritual development?