

Negotiating gender equality among Pakistani Bahá'ís: A qualitative study

Saleha, Ayesha Zaka, Humaira Tehsin*

*Lecturer Sociology and Gender Studies, University of Home Economics, Lahore

Abstract

This article examines how gender equality is interpreted and enacted within the Pakistani Bahá'í community, a religious minority whose teachings explicitly endorse egalitarian principles. Drawing on twenty in-depth interviews with Bahá'í men and women, the study explores how religious ideals of gender equality are negotiated in everyday life within a patriarchal Muslim-majority society. Using a qualitative thematic analysis, the findings reveal that gender equality among Pakistani Bahá'ís is not a fixed outcome of doctrine but a lived and negotiated practice shaped by cultural norms, minority status, and social constraints. Bahá'í teachings function as a moral and interpretive framework through which participants justify egalitarian practices related to education, work, and family roles. However, persistent patriarchal expectations—particularly around masculinity, breadwinning, and leadership—continue to influence gendered experiences. Women's agency emerges through strategic negotiation and religious legitimation rather than overt resistance. The study contributes to feminist sociology of religion by highlighting how egalitarian religious ideals are mediated through everyday practice and minority positioning. It also adds to South Asian sociological scholarship by offering rare empirical insight into the internal gender dynamics of a minority religious community in Pakistan.

Keywords: gender equality; lived religion; Bahá'í Faith; religious minorities; Pakistan

Introduction

Gender equality has become a central concern in sociological debates on religion, particularly in relation to how religious traditions shape, constrain, or enable women's lives. While religion is often portrayed as inherently patriarchal, feminist scholars have increasingly challenged such monolithic representations by examining the complex and context-specific ways in which gender relations are negotiated within religious communities (Avishai, 2008; Woodhead, 2007). These debates have shifted attention away from formal doctrine toward everyday practices, highlighting the importance of examining how religious ideals are interpreted and enacted in lived experience (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014).

Within this body of scholarship, religious traditions that explicitly endorse gender equality remain underexplored, particularly in non-Western and minority contexts. The Bahá'í Faith represents a significant case in this regard, as equality between men and women is articulated as a core religious principle rather than a secondary social ideal (Esslemont, 1980; Smith, 2008). However, sociological research suggests that egalitarian religious teachings do not automatically translate into egalitarian social

practices, especially when embedded within broader patriarchal structures (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Woodhead, 2007).

In Pakistan, gender relations are deeply shaped by cultural norms, economic constraints, and religious discourses that often reinforce traditional gender roles (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Shaheed, 2010). For religious minorities, these dynamics are further complicated by issues of marginalization, social visibility, and vulnerability (Malik, 2002). Minority communities must often negotiate internal values while remaining attentive to external pressures, which can influence how ideals such as gender equality are pursued and expressed in everyday life.

Despite the presence of Bahá'í communities in Pakistan, there is limited sociological research examining their internal gender dynamics. Existing studies on religion and gender in South Asia have largely focused on Muslim-majority contexts, often overlooking minority religious experiences or treating them as peripheral (Shaheed, 2010). As a result, little is known about how Bahá'í teachings on gender equality are understood, negotiated, and practiced within the specific socio-cultural conditions of Pakistan.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how Pakistani Bahá'ís interpret and enact gender equality in their everyday lives. Drawing on twenty in-depth interviews with Bahá'í men and women, the study examines how religious ideals intersect with cultural norms, family expectations, and minority status. Rather than assessing the extent to which equality is “achieved,” the article adopts a qualitative sociological approach to understand equality as a lived and negotiated practice (McGuire, 2008).

By focusing on lived experiences, this research contributes to feminist sociology of religion by challenging binary representations of religion as either oppressive or emancipatory. It also adds to South Asian sociological scholarship by offering empirical insight into the gender dynamics of a religious minority community in Pakistan. In doing so, the study highlights the importance of context in shaping how egalitarian religious principles are interpreted and enacted.

Literature Review

Gender, Religion, and Lived Equality

Sociological research on gender and religion has increasingly moved beyond doctrinal analysis to examine how religious ideals are interpreted and practiced in everyday life. Feminist scholars argue that religious traditions cannot be understood solely through formal teachings, as gender relations within religious communities are shaped by broader cultural, social, and political contexts (Avishai, 2008; McGuire, 2008). This shift has given rise to the concept of lived religion, which emphasizes everyday negotiations through which believers interpret religious norms in their personal and communal lives (Ammerman, 2014).

Within this framework, gender equality is understood not as a fixed outcome of religious doctrine but as a dynamic and contested process shaped by power relations and cultural expectations (Avishai, Jafar, & Rinaldo, 2015). Studies across diverse religious traditions show that even when equality is formally endorsed, gender

hierarchies often persist in practice, particularly in patriarchal societies (Woodhead, 2007).

Bahá'í Teachings on Gender Equality: Ideals and Debates

The Bahá'í Faith is frequently highlighted for its explicit articulation of gender equality as a foundational religious principle. Bahá'í writings emphasize the equal spiritual status of men and women, shared family responsibilities, and women's education as central to social progress (Esslemont, 1980; Smith, 2008). Unlike many religious traditions where gender equality is subject to interpretive debate, Bahá'í scripture presents equality as a normative religious ideal.

At the same time, scholars note that Bahá'í teachings include certain institutional distinctions, such as gendered inheritance laws and the exclusion of women from the Universal House of Justice, which have generated debate regarding the scope and meaning of equality within the faith (Smith, 2008; Saiedi, 2008). While Bahá'í scholarship often frames these distinctions as functional rather than hierarchical, sociological questions remain regarding how such exceptions are understood and negotiated in everyday practice.

Existing research on Bahá'í gender equality has largely focused on theological exposition or global representations of the faith, with limited empirical attention to lived experiences in culturally conservative societies (McMullen, 2000). This gap is particularly evident in studies situated in Muslim-majority contexts.

Gender, Patriarchy, and Minority Status in Pakistan

Gender relations in Pakistan are shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that influence family organization, labor participation, and access to authority (Shaheed, 2010; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Despite constitutional commitments to gender equality, social norms continue to privilege male authority and constrain women's autonomy in both private and public spheres (Khan, 2007).

For religious minorities, these gendered dynamics are further complicated by social marginalization and vulnerability. Existing scholarship on minorities in Pakistan has focused primarily on discrimination, legal exclusion, and identity politics, often overlooking internal gender relations (Malik, 2002; Nayyar & Salim, 2006). Minority communities may therefore pursue gender reform cautiously, balancing religious ideals with concerns about social acceptance and security.

Within this context, the Bahá'í community represents a distinctive case: a religious minority that formally endorses gender equality while operating within a patriarchal and constrained social environment.

Research Gap and Contribution

While feminist sociology of religion has extensively theorized gender and lived religious practice, empirical studies examining egalitarian religious ideals within minority contexts remain limited (Avishai et al., 2015). Similarly, scholarship on the

Bahá'í Faith has tended to privilege doctrinal analysis over everyday experience, particularly outside Western settings (McMullen, 2000).

This study addresses these gaps by examining how Pakistani Bahá'í men and women interpret and enact gender equality in their everyday lives. By foregrounding lived experience, it contributes to sociological debates on gender, religion, and minority life in South Asia.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how gender equality is interpreted and enacted within the Pakistani Bahá'í community. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for examining lived experiences, meanings, and negotiations surrounding religious and gendered practices, as they allow for in-depth engagement with participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Given the exploratory nature of the research and the limited existing scholarship on Pakistani Bahá'ís, in-depth interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection.

Participants and Sampling

The study draws on twenty in-depth interviews conducted with members of the Bahá'í community in Pakistan, comprising ten women and ten men. A gender-balanced sample was intentionally selected to capture diverse perspectives on gender equality and to examine how experiences and interpretations may vary across gender lines.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, a common approach in qualitative research involving small or hard-to-access populations (Bryman, 2016). Given the Bahá'í community's minority status in Pakistan, initial contacts were made through trusted community networks, after which participants recommended others who met the study criteria. All participants were adults and actively involved in family, community, or professional life.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided flexibility to explore participants' lived experiences while maintaining a consistent focus on the research questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews covered themes such as understandings of gender equality, family roles, education, work, leadership, and experiences of negotiating religious ideals within Pakistani society.

Interviews were conducted in a language comfortable for participants, primarily Urdu and English, and ranged from approximately 60 to 90 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were assigned.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the research design, particularly given the religious minority status of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research. Care was taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, especially in relation to potentially sensitive discussions about religion, gender roles, and social constraints.

The researcher remained attentive to issues of power, trust, and representation throughout the research process, recognizing the responsibility involved in documenting the experiences of a socially vulnerable community (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001)

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data sets.

Analysis involved:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcript
2. Initial coding of meaningful segments
3. Identification of recurring patterns and themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes in relation to the data
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing an analytically coherent narrative

Themes were developed inductively, allowing insights to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical categories. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to how participants articulated gender equality in relation to religious ideals, cultural norms, and everyday practices.

Reflexivity and Rigor

To enhance analytical rigor, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher remained conscious of their positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation, particularly given the sensitive intersection of religion, gender, and minority identity. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data and careful contextual interpretation, ensuring that participants' voices were represented accurately and respectfully (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Methodological Contribution

By employing qualitative in-depth interviews with a gender-balanced sample, this study offers rare empirical insight into the lived experiences of Pakistani Bahá'ís. The methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of how gender equality is

negotiated within a minority religious community, contributing to broader sociological debates on lived religion, gender, and social context.

Findings

This section presents the key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of twenty in-depth interviews conducted with Pakistani Bahá'í men and women. The findings highlight how gender equality is understood, negotiated, and practiced within the community. While participants consistently endorsed egalitarian ideals, their narratives reveal complex negotiations shaped by cultural norms, family expectations, and minority status.

Theme 1: Gender Equality as a Religious Ideal

Across interviews, both men and women emphasized that gender equality is a foundational principle of the Bahá'í Faith. Participants described equality as divinely ordained rather than socially constructed, often framing it as self-evident and non-negotiable.

One female participant explained:

“In our faith, equality is not a modern idea. It is something that has always been there. Men and women are equal before God.”

Similarly, male respondents frequently positioned gender equality as a moral obligation rather than a personal preference. Several participants contrasted Bahá'í teachings with dominant social norms in Pakistan, describing their religious identity as a source of distinction.

However, while equality was strongly affirmed at the level of belief, participants acknowledged that its implementation varied across households and social settings.

Theme 2: Education as the Primary Site of Equality

Education emerged as the most consistently supported domain of gender equality. Participants repeatedly emphasized that girls' education was prioritised within Bahá'í families, often described as a religious duty.

A male participant noted:

“If resources are limited, our teachings say that girls' education should come first, because she will raise the next generation.”

Women described education as both an expectation and a resource that enabled greater confidence and participation in public life. Unlike other areas of gender relations, education was rarely contested, suggesting broad internal consensus within the community.

Theme 3: Negotiating Gender Roles within the Family

Despite strong endorsement of equality, traditional gender roles—particularly around domestic responsibilities and breadwinning—remained influential. Women frequently described managing household duties alongside professional or educational commitments, while men’s participation in domestic work varied.

One female respondent shared:

“My husband believes in equality, but when it comes to housework, it is still mostly my responsibility.”

Male participants often expressed support for shared responsibilities but also acknowledged social pressures associated with masculinity and earning roles. These narratives suggest that equality is negotiated within existing cultural frameworks rather than enacted uniformly.

Theme 4: Women’s Agency through Strategic Negotiation

Women’s accounts highlighted forms of agency that were subtle and context-sensitive. Rather than directly challenging patriarchal norms, many women described using religious teachings to justify their choices regarding education, employment, and delayed marriage.

A female participant explained:

“When I say this is part of my faith, people listen differently. It gives strength to my choices.”

Such strategies allowed women to expand their roles while maintaining social legitimacy within both family and community settings.

Theme 5: Minority Status and Cautious Practice of Equality

Participants repeatedly referred to their position as a religious minority in Pakistan. This minority status shaped how openly gender equality could be practiced and discussed. Several respondents described the need to avoid drawing attention or provoking misunderstanding.

One participant remarked:

“We have to be careful. We want to live our values, but we also want to stay safe and accepted.”

This caution influenced the pace and visibility of change, reinforcing gradual and internally focused approaches to equality rather than public confrontation.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that gender equality among Pakistani Bahá’ís is widely accepted as a religious ideal but variably practiced in everyday life. Education

serves as the most established site of equality, while family roles and public participation remain arenas of negotiation.

Discussion

This study examined how gender equality is interpreted and enacted among Pakistani Bahá'ís, situating lived experiences within the intersecting contexts of religious ideals, patriarchal social norms, and minority status. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews, the findings demonstrate that gender equality within the Bahá'í community is neither merely doctrinal nor uniformly realized. Instead, it emerges as a negotiated social practice, shaped by everyday interactions, moral reasoning, and structural constraints. This discussion theorises these findings using key frameworks from the sociology of religion and gender.

Gender Equality as Lived Religion

Participants' articulation of gender equality as self-evident, morally binding, and divinely ordained aligns closely with the sociological concept of lived religion (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014). Rather than engaging with equality as an abstract theological principle, respondents drew upon religious language to make sense of practical decisions related to education, employment, and family responsibilities. In this sense, Bahá'í teachings functioned as an interpretive resource through which everyday gendered practices were legitimized.

This finding supports feminist critiques of doctrine-centred approaches to religion, which argue that religious meanings are produced and sustained through daily practices rather than formal texts alone (Avishai, 2008). Participants' emphasis on equality as divinely ordained explains why deviations in practice were often described as social rather than religious failures

Gender equality among Pakistani Bahá'ís is therefore best understood not as a fixed outcome of belief but as an ongoing process of meaning-making embedded in everyday life.

Doing Gender within Egalitarian Religious Ideals

Despite strong endorsement of equality, participants' narratives revealed persistent gendered expectations, particularly regarding masculinity, breadwinning, and authority. These findings resonate with West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender," which conceptualizes gender as an ongoing social performance rather than a static role. Even within a religious framework that ideologically rejects gender hierarchy, participants continued to navigate culturally entrenched performances of masculinity and femininity.

Male respondents' accounts of discomfort and ambivalence highlight how egalitarian religious ideals can coexist with patriarchal social structures. As Woodhead (2007) argues, religion may simultaneously challenge and reproduce gendered power relations, depending on how it is embedded within broader social contexts. In Pakistan, where patriarchal norms remain dominant, Bahá'í men's negotiation of

shared responsibility illustrates the limits of ideological change in the absence of broader structural transformation.

Women's Agency and the Politics of Legitimation

Women's narratives in this study complicate liberal feminist assumptions that equate agency solely with resistance. Instead, women exercised agency through strategic negotiation, selective compliance, and moral justification rooted in religious discourse. This aligns with Mahmood's (2005) critique of resistance-centric models of agency, which overlook forms of action that operate within, rather than against, normative frameworks.

Education emerged as a particularly uncontested domain of equality, suggesting that religious legitimation is most effective where it aligns with broader social aspirations.

By invoking Bahá'í teachings to legitimize education, employment, and leadership, women were able to expand their social roles without directly confronting dominant gender norms. Avishai (2008) describes such practices as forms of religiously authorized agency, where legitimacy is central to women's ability to act. In the Pakistani context, where overt challenges to patriarchy can invite social sanction, such strategies allow women to pursue equality while maintaining social and moral credibility.

Minority Status and the Careful Pursuit of Equality

An important contribution of this study lies in its illumination of how minority status intensifies gender negotiation. Participants' cautious approach to change reflects an awareness of social vulnerability and the need to preserve communal cohesion. This finding extends existing scholarship on gender and religion by demonstrating how minority positioning shapes not only external relations but also internal gender dynamics.

Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo (2015) argue that religious practices are shaped by broader power relations, including marginalization and surveillance. For Pakistani Bahá'ís, the pursuit of gender equality is therefore constrained by concerns about visibility, acceptance, and security. Equality is enacted incrementally, through education and everyday practice, rather than through overt challenge or public confrontation.

Rethinking Religious Gender Equality

Taken together, these findings challenge binary representations of religious traditions as either oppressive or emancipatory. Instead, they support sociological approaches that view religion as a site of negotiation, where ideals are continually reshaped through lived experience. Gender equality among Pakistani Bahá'ís is neither symbolic rhetoric nor fully realized practice; it is a contextual and evolving project shaped by religion, culture, and minority life.

By foregrounding lived experiences, this study contributes to feminist sociology of religion by demonstrating how egalitarian religious ideals are mediated through social

constraints. It also adds to South Asian sociological scholarship by offering rare empirical insight into the internal gender dynamics of a minority religious community in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how gender equality is interpreted and enacted among Pakistani Bahá'ís, a religious minority whose teachings explicitly endorse egalitarian principles. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Bahá'í men and women, the study demonstrates that gender equality within this community is neither merely symbolic nor uniformly realized. Instead, it is best understood as a negotiated social practice, shaped by the interaction of religious ideals, patriarchal cultural norms, and minority status.

By foregrounding lived experiences, this research contributes to the sociology of religion by moving beyond doctrinal accounts of religious equality. The findings show that Bahá'í teachings function as a moral and interpretive framework through which individuals justify everyday decisions related to education, work, and family life. However, these ideals are enacted within a social environment where patriarchal expectations continue to structure gendered roles and responsibilities. As a result, gender equality emerges not as a fixed outcome of belief but as an ongoing process of negotiation.

The study also contributes to feminist sociological debates on agency by demonstrating that women's engagement with equality does not always take the form of overt resistance. Instead, Pakistani Bahá'í women often exercise agency through strategic negotiation, selective compliance, and religious legitimation. These practices challenge simplistic binaries that position religion as either oppressive or emancipatory and highlight the importance of context-sensitive understandings of women's agency.

A further contribution of this research lies in its attention to minority status as a structuring condition of gender relations. The findings indicate that the pursuit of gender equality among Pakistani Bahá'ís is shaped by concerns about social visibility, community cohesion, and vulnerability. This adds to existing scholarship by showing how minority positioning can intensify the careful negotiation of egalitarian ideals, influencing not only public engagement but also internal community dynamics.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small sample and reflect the experiences of participants willing to speak openly about gender and religion. Future research could extend this work by exploring generational differences, comparative minority contexts, or longitudinal changes in gender practices within Bahá'í communities in Pakistan and beyond.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that religious gender equality cannot be understood solely through formal teachings or institutional claims. Instead, it must be examined as a lived, contextual, and negotiated practice. By situating Bahá'í gender ideals within the specific social realities of Pakistan, this research offers valuable insights into how egalitarian religious principles are pursued, adapted, and sustained within patriarchal and minority contexts.

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