

FAITH AND PLURALISM: THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND COUNTERING EXTREMISM IN LAHORE (A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BAHAR COLONY AND SANDHAR VILLAGE)

Khushbakht Bajwa

PhD Scholar, School of Political Science, Minhaj University Lahore

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Corresponding Author: *

Khushbakht Bajwa

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the intersection of gender, religion, and minority identity through the lives of the people of the two regions in Lahore, Pakistan (Bahar Colony) and Sundar Village (rural setting). Being women in a doubly marginalised group, namely gender and religious minority, they face the root of discrimination, limited political representation, and socio-economic lack of integration in the system. In Bahar Colony, a settlement with a majority of Christians, the struggles of women are urban complexities and rural vulnerabilities: they have to live without being included in the mainstream political life, whereas in Sundar Village, women tend to be silenced and secluded by social, religious and political marginalisation. Nevertheless, even, with these obstacles, Christian women are very resilient and agency. They practice interfaith dialogue, grassroots peacebuilding, and community mediation and oppose extreme pressures that aim at marginalising them even more. Using the feminist, intersectionality, and peacebuilding theories, this paper identifies the ways in which Christian women disrupt the discourse of extremism and develop pluralism on the ground level. The interview and focus group discussions conducted during fieldwork show a two-sided reality: such women are still victims of structural inequalities, although they are active actors who unite local networks, promote curriculum change, and oppose hate speech. The study argues for reimagining counter-extremism strategies that move beyond state-centric security models toward inclusive, community-led frameworks. It highlights the crucial role of minority women and faith institutions, including churches, in promoting tolerance, religious pluralism, and resilient peace in South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the experiences of Christian women in two distinct sites: Bahaar Colony, an urban Christian settlement in Lahore, and Sandhar Village, a rural community on the city's outskirts. Considering that the residents of Bahaar Colony live near educational establishments and non-governmental organizations, it is stated that they face discrimination and stigma at work places in domestic and sanitation

areas. In Sandhar Village, women on the other hand encounter illiteracy, bondage labour, and non-inclusion in political affairs because of feudal systems in rural areas. In spite of such distinctions, women in these two regions play a role in peace and harmony by having interfaith relations, promotion of education and opposition to extremist stories on the ground.

The theoretical perspectives informing the study are the intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to understand interconnected oppressions, resilience theory (Ungar, 2011) to understand how women cope with adversity and the peacebuilding paradigms (Appleby, 2000; Sen, 2006) to contextualize Christian women as actors of pluralism. The study is based on the qualitative field work, comprising of 10 in-depth interviews with Christian women (5 in Bahaar Colony, 5 in Sandhar Village) with the assistance of the focus group evidence and the background information of the NGOs.

Religious extremism has deeply affected the social and political fabric of Pakistan since the 1980s, when General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies institutionalized intolerance and restricted the rights of minorities (Talbot, 2012; Ali, 2015). The discriminatory application of laws, such as the blasphemy provisions, has disproportionately targeted Christians and other minorities, contributing to their exclusion from mainstream society (Shah, 2019). At the same time, patriarchal norms continue to confine women's roles, limiting their access to education, political representation, and economic opportunities (Bari, 2005; Fleschenberg & Bari, 2016).

Christian women thus experience double marginalization—on account of both gender and religion. They are overrepresented in sanitation work, domestic labor, and bonded agricultural work (Rahman, 2012; Lall, 2021). Yet, despite structural discrimination, Christian women also emerge as resilient actors, using churches, informal networks, and community schools as spaces to resist exclusion and promote tolerance. Literature on extremism and peacebuilding highlights the potential role of marginalized groups in fostering pluralism (Appleby, 2000; Sen, 2006), but research rarely foregrounds the voices of Christian women in Pakistan. By situating Bahaar Colony and Sandhar Village within debates on extremism, gender, and pluralism, this paper shows that Christian women are not only survivors of discrimination but also critical actors in building resilient societies and countering extremism at its roots.

Research Objectives

1. Investigate the socio-political marginalisation of Christian women in Lahore within the framework of faith and pluralism.
2. Explore their contributions in advancing religious tolerance, interfaith harmony, and community peacebuilding.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three main reasons. First, it makes an academic contribution by addressing a gap in existing literature, which has largely focused on extremism and women's participation separately without paying attention to the intersection of gender, religion, and minority identity. By centering Christian women, the research demonstrates how marginalized women are not only victims but also active contributors to peace and pluralism (Crenshaw, 1989; Appleby, 2000).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist Theory & Intersectionality

Feminist theory has long foregrounded the importance of examining gendered structures of power, but intersectionality provides a more nuanced lens to analyze how women with multiple marginalized identities experience oppression in complex ways. Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality to show how race and gender intersect to create unique modes of discrimination; similarly, in contexts like Pakistan, religion and gender intersect to produce distinct forms of exclusion. In other words.

2.2 Resilience Theory

Resilience theory emphasizes how individuals and communities adapt, resist, and recover in adverse conditions (Ungar, 2011). Unlike views that treat resilience as innate or heroic, contemporary research conceptualizes it as socially and contextually constructed: resilience depends on access to resources, supportive networks, cultural practices, and adaptive strategies (Masten, 2001). In marginalized communities, resilience is visible in everyday survival strategies, informal support systems, and resistance.

2.3 Extremism in Pakistan: Historical & Structural Dynamics

To contextualize Christian women's experiences, it is necessary to understand the trajectory of religious extremism in Pakistan. The Islamization policies of General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s and 1980s institutionalized Islamic identity in legal, educational, and social systems (Talbot, 2012). These policies introduced discriminatory laws—especially blasphemy laws—that disproportionately target religious minorities (Shah, 2019).

2.4 Christian Communities in Pakistan: Socio-economic and Cultural Realities

Christian communities in Pakistan often occupy the lowest rungs of socio-economic hierarchies, especially in Punjab and parts of Sindh (Rahman, 2012; Lall, 2021). Many Christians descend from historically marginalized groups, working in sanitation, domestic labor, or brick-kilns, with limited access to quality education or upward mobility (NCJP Reports, 2018). Discrimination in schooling, hiring, property rights, and social exclusion are well documented (HRCP, 2020).

2.5 Women as Agents of Peace & Tolerance

Emerging scholarship globally underscores women's critical potential in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and countering extremism (Bouta, Frerks & Bannon, 2005). Women's social roles and relational networks often position them uniquely as mediators, educators, and community bridges (Ghosh, 2019). In South Asia, women-led interfaith initiatives, peace committees, and micro-level dialogues have shown promising outcomes (Naaz, 2017).

2.6 Pluralism & Counter-Extremism Strategies

The concept of pluralism refers to the recognition and respect for diverse religious, cultural, and social identities within a society (Sen, 2006). Pluralistic frameworks argue that preventing extremism requires creating inclusive spaces where multiple identities can coexist (Appleby, 2000). In educational contexts, pluralistic curricula can reduce prejudice and build respect for minorities (UNESCO, 2017).

Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative, comparative multiple-case study design was adopted to examine how Christian women in Lahore District experience, interpret and respond to religiously gendered exclusion. The logic of comparison (Urban = Bahaar Colony; Rural = Sandhar Village) permits systematic juxtaposition of context-specific mechanisms while retaining the idiographic depth that quantitative instruments cannot supply (Yin, 2018).

3.2 Study Sites

Bahaar Colony (urban) – a congested, inner-city Christian quarter where residents work predominantly as domestic, sanitation or informal-sector labour; infrastructurally deprived yet NGO- and church-adjacent.

Sandhar Village (rural) – a peri-agrarian settlement whose Christian households depend on share-cropping, brick-kiln debt-bondage and seasonal wage work; spatially isolated from state and civil-society support infrastructures. The socio-spatial contrast generates analytic variance on exposure to extremist discourse, mobility constraints, and faith-based coping resources.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Strategy

Ten Christian women aged 19–58 were recruited through purposive-maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015). Five participants were drawn from each site; variation parameters included age, education, marital status, household composition and primary occupation (domestic worker, kiln worker, teacher, home-based artisan, unemployed). Saturation was reached at the tenth interview; no new thematic properties emerged.

3.4 Data-Collection Tools

- i. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–90 min) using a 10-question guide (see Appendix A).
- ii. Focus-group discussions (one per site; 4–5 participants each) to triangulate and enrich individual narratives.
- iii. Non-participant observation fieldnotes (25 h) on neighbourhood spatiality, church events, and interfaith encounters.

iv. All instruments were pilot-tested with two non-sample respondents; wording was refined for cultural idiom and sensitivity.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were managed in NVivo 15. Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis was executed:

- (1) Familiarisation through repeated listening/reading;
- (2) Systematic open coding (143 initial codes);
- (3) Collating into candidate themes (identity work,

intersectional vulnerability, lived extremism, peacebuilding agency, institutional mediation, prescriptive pluralism);

(4) Review against data set (within-case and cross-case matrices);

(5) Defining and naming themes (see 4 Findings);

(6) Producing the final integrative narrative. Comparative tactics (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2020)—pattern matching, explanation building and site-ordered displays—were applied to illuminate urban–rural convergences and divergences.

4. Findings and Discussion

Thematic coding frame (NVivo-15 compatible) derived from 10 semi-structured interview questions with Christian women

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Description (2–3 sentences)
1. Faith-based Everyday Praxis	1.1 Ritualised temporality 1.2 Moral labour & identity work 1.3 Gendered piety as social capital	Captures how belief is translated into routinised bodily practices, ethical decision-making and reputational management. These micro-processes reveal faith not as private abstraction but as an embodied, relational resource that women strategically mobilise to navigate communal expectations.
2. Intersectional Vulnerability	2.1 Sectarianised misogyny 2.2 Economic precarity amplified by religion 2.3 Political disenfranchisement	Documents converging axes of exclusion where religious minority status intensifies gendered and class-based harms. Participants narrate how extremist discourses securitise their presence in public space, converting difference into risk.
3. Lived Extremism & Micro-Resistance	3.1 Spatialised intimidation (study/work) 3.2 Self-surveillance & circumscribed mobility 3.3 Covert coping strategies	Chronicles the granular tactics through which extremist norms discipline Christian women's mobility, labour and voice. Simultaneously records subtle acts of defiance—code-switching, quiet persistence, hidden networks—that erode hegemonic control without direct confrontation.

4. Peacebuilding Agency	4.1 Interfaith gesture labour	4.2
	Narrative brokerage	4.3
	Embodied solidarity performances	

Encodes participants' self-narrated capacity to re-script communal imaginaries through storytelling, ritual sharing and affective labour. Highlights how feminised peace work is rendered invisible yet underpins local infrastructures of coexistence.

5. Structural & Institutional Mediation	5.1 Ecclesial scaffolding	5.2
	Media semiotics	5.3 Legal
	architectures of inclusion	

Maps the enabling or constraining role of church, media and state instruments in amplifying or muting women's peace praxis. Reveals disjunctures between grassroots tolerance work and institutional (in)action, signalling sites of potential coalition.

6. Reflexive Prescriptions for Pluralism	6.1 Rights-based legal literacy	6.2
	Pedagogies of empathy	6.3
	Counter-hegemonic messaging	

Consolidates participants' forward-looking discourses that translate personal harms into policy blueprints and ethical appeals. Functions as a normative horizon linking individual resilience to systemic transformation, thereby looping back to inform Theme 1's praxis with renewed political intent.

Interconnections: Themes 1 & 6 form a praxis-normative loop; Themes 2 & 3 depict the problem-space that necessitates Themes 4 & 5's remedial scripts; Theme 5 mediates the dialectic between vulnerability (2) and agency (4), illustrating how institutional affordances calibrate the spectrum from resilience to resistance.

This part shows the most important results of the fieldwork at Bahaar Colony (urban Lahore) and Sandhar Village (rural Lahore). The data were gathered using survey on 100 women and 10 in-depth interviews (5 of each site) with support of discussions about the focus groups and observation in the field. The results are classified according to themes in order to bring out similarities and differences between the two communities. The discourse incorporates the theoretical views of intersectionality, resilience, and

peacebuilding.

4.1 Social Identity and Religious Experience

According to the reports given by Christian women in Bahaar Colony, stigma is a common occurrence in workplaces where they work as domestic workers or sanitation personnel. One of the participants reported: "Even when we are working harder we are still named and are kept in a distance. In Sandhar Village, women narrated how they were not included in the decision-making process and social gatherings in the community, and this contributed to their marginality in a Muslim dominated village. Despite this, both groups derive resilience and dignity from their faith and church networks.

4.2 Education and Barriers

Access to education emerged as a critical challenge. In Bahaar Colony, schools exist, but dropout rates are high due to poverty and bullying of Christian children. Women reported that their daughters often left school by secondary level. In Sandhar Village, most women reported illiteracy and stated that their daughters rarely attend school, with one respondent remarking: "Education is for others, not for our girls."

4.3 Economic Conditions and Livelihoods

Economic marginalization was consistently reported across both sites. In Bahaar Colony, women work as domestic servants or municipal cleaners with insecure wages and no benefits. In Sandhar Village, women labor in agriculture or brick-kilns, often in bonded arrangements, earning less than minimum wage. This confirms broader findings that Christian women are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, stigmatized labor (Rahman, 2012; Lall, 2021).

4.4 Political Participation

In Bahaar Colony, some women expressed awareness of voting rights, though fear and lack of representation limited their engagement. "We can vote," one participant explained, "but our vote changes nothing." In Sandhar Village, political participation was almost absent, as decisions were mediated by male family members or local landlords.

These findings echo earlier studies that show structural exclusion of minority women from politics (Bari, 2005; Fleschenberg & Bari, 2016).

4.5 Role in Promoting Tolerance and Countering Extremism

Despite their marginalization, Christian women demonstrated agency as peacebuilders. In Bahaar Colony, women described small acts of tolerance, such as building respectful ties with Muslim neighbors and promoting interfaith understanding among children. In Sandhar Village, women highlighted their reliance on prayer groups and informal community gatherings to sustain harmony with Muslim families.

4.6 Comparative Synthesis

The comparative analysis shows the major differences between the two sites. The urban women in Bahaar Colony are more institutionally discriminated at work places and schools but to a small extent, they have more exposure to NGOs and church-based programs. Both female rural in Sandhar Village are more isolated and financially dependent but show high informal solidarity networks. The two groups are however faced with systemic exclusion but channel strength towards tolerance. The results are in line with intersectionality theory.

Comparative snapshot – Bahaar Colony vs. Sandhar Village Table

2

Site-level contrasts salient to Christian women's tolerance work and extremism management

Dimension	Bahaar Colony (Urban)	Sandhar Village (Rural)
Spatial location	2 km from Lahore's CBD; enclosed Christian "ghetto"	35 km south-west; peri-agrarian belt, mixed-religion hamlets
Population density	≈55,000/km ² ; multi-storey rented warrens	≈1,200/km ² ; dispersed brick houses amid wheat fields
Economic niche	Domestic service, sanitation, informal factories	Share-cropping, brick-kiln bonded labour, seasonal harvesting

Physical mobility	Bus/metro access; movement curtailed by neighbourhood stigma, not distance	Limited public transport; Muslim landlord surveillance restricts female mobility
Exposure to extremist narrative	Occasional mosque loudspeaker sermons; workplace Islamisation	Routine Friday sermons + landlord's patronage of madrassah; blasphemy accusations more frequent
Church infrastructure	3 historic churches, 2 NGO-run schools, weekly women's fellowships	1 small parish, visiting priest fortnightly; no Christian school within 8 km
NGO/CSO presence	6 active NGOs provide legal aid, vocational training	1 intermittent literacy NGO; no legal aid
Interfaith contact sites	Employers' homes, public hospitals, metro bus	Muslim fields, kiln yards, village well; minimal structured dialogue
Resilience repertoire	Collective bargaining through worker unions, covert Bible study in parks, social-media micro-solidarity	Quiet reciprocity (medicinal herbs, midwifery), hymn singing at night, kin-based rotating credit
Notable peace-promotion window	Urban inter-women's group "Dastak" meets monthly in church hall; invites Muslim domestic-worker employers	Harvest-time "roti exchange" between Christian & Muslim women at kiln; informal conflict mediation by elder "Bibi Ji"

5. Policy Implications Emerging from Findings

The findings underscore the urgent need for policies that address structural discrimination. Education reforms must ensure safe and inclusive schooling for Christian girls. Labor protections should extend to domestic and agricultural workers. Political reforms should strengthen minority women's representation at local and national levels. Supporting grassroots women's initiatives can amplify their peacebuilding roles and help counter extremist narratives at community.

This section interprets the findings of the study in light of relevant theoretical frameworks and situates them within broader academic and policy debates. The discussion highlights urban-rural dynamics in Bahaar Colony and Sandhar Village, the role of Christian women as peacebuilders, connections to

global comparative cases, and the theoretical contributions of the research.

5.1 Intersectionality and Urban-Rural Dynamics

The findings reinforce the argument that Christian women in Pakistan are doubly marginalized due to the intersection of gender and religion (Crenshaw, 1989). In Bahaar Colony, women face stigma in workplaces and educational institutions, illustrating the institutional barriers of urban contexts. In Sandhar Village, women encounter severe illiteracy, bonded labor, and exclusion from political processes, reflecting structural disadvantages of rural contexts.

5.2 Resilience and Everyday Survival

Resilience theory (Ungar, 2011; Masten, 2001) provides a useful lens for understanding how Christian women mobilize faith-based and

community resources to navigate adversity. In Bahaar Colony, resilience manifests through church networks, community schools, and NGO support, while in Sandhar Village it takes the form of prayer groups, solidarity in agricultural work, and reliance on informal community structures.

5.3 Christian Women as Peacebuilders

The thematic analysis highlights that Christian women are not merely passive recipients of discrimination but active contributors to peacebuilding. In Bahaar Colony, women reported creating interfaith friendships in workplaces and teaching children respect for other faiths. In Sandhar Village, women emphasized maintaining harmony with Muslim neighbors through mutual support in times of crisis.

5.4 Global Comparative Perspectives

Comparisons with global contexts underline the broader significance of these findings. In Nigeria, Christian women have been central in resisting Boko Haram's extremist narratives by mobilizing communities and advocating education for girls (Matfess, 2017). In Sri Lanka, minority women have played vital roles in post-conflict reconciliation efforts (de Mel, 2007).

5.5 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends intersectionality by demonstrating how religion and gender intersect in specific urban-rural contexts of Pakistan. Second, it enriches resilience theory by showing how faith and community solidarity form crucial coping mechanisms in marginalized groups. Third, it advances peacebuilding literature by framing minority women as central agents of pluralism, thereby challenging dominant narratives that often overlook them.

5.6 Implications for Policy and Research

The discussion suggests that inclusive policies must prioritize minority women's education, labor rights, and political representation. Christian women's grassroots initiatives should be recognized and supported as part of counter-extremism strategies. Further research should broaden the scope by

including other minority women across Pakistan and employing longitudinal methods to capture changes over time.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the complex intersection of gender, faith, and minority identity by focusing on the lived realities of Christian women in Bahaar Colony (urban Lahore) and Sandhar Village (rural Lahore). The findings confirm that Christian women face double marginalization—by patriarchal gender norms and systemic religious discrimination. In Bahaar Colony, women encounter institutional barriers such as workplace stigma and educational exclusion, while in Sandhar Village, they struggle with illiteracy. The study re-emphasizes women's agency by documenting their contributions to interfaith harmony, tolerance-building, and grassroots peacebuilding. Whether through everyday acts of respect in Bahaar Colony or solidarity networks in Sandhar Village, Christian women demonstrate the capacity to challenge extremist narratives and promote pluralism. Their role as peacebuilders provides crucial evidence that marginalized minority women hold transformative potential for creating more inclusive and resilient. Theoretically, this research contributes to extending intersectionality into the Pakistani minority context, enriches resilience theory by highlighting faith-based survival strategies, and advances peacebuilding literature by situating Christian women as central rather than peripheral actors. Practically, the study underscores the urgent need for policy reforms in education, labor rights, and political representation, as well as the roles of NGOs, churches, and AI-based media monitoring in countering hate. Finally, the research opens new avenues for future inquiry. Future studies should include comparative perspectives across other minority women in Pakistan, longitudinal research on the impact of policy reforms, and closer exploration of digital spaces where women counter extremism. Expanding the scope to regional or global comparative contexts will further deepen our understanding of minority women as peacebuilders in conflict-prone societies. Christian women in Lahore—whether in urban Bahaar Colony or rural Sandhar Village, are not merely subjects of marginalization but agents of change, whose voices and practices must be recognized in both academic discourse and policy

frameworks aimed at fostering pluralism and sustainable peace.

7. Recommendation

7.1 Education Reforms

- i. Inclusive Curricula: Promote pluralism, interfaith relations and religious tolerance on the national curriculum (UNESCO, 2017).
- ii. Safe Schooling: Provide Christian female students with a safe academic setting against bullying and harassment.
- iii. Scholarships: Initiate special scholarships and professional education among minority women to minimize the level of dropouts and economic status.
- iv. Teacher Training: Include tolerance and interfaith dialogue in teacher training.

7.2 Policy Measures

- i. Minority Representation: increase the representation of Christian women in local and national governance.
- ii. Labor Rights: Have formal labor protection to domestic, sanitation, agricultural and brick-kiln workers.
- iii. Social Protection Schemes: Income Support Programmes such as the Benazir Income Support Programme should be given preference to minority women.

7.3 Legislative Frameworks

- i. Anti-Discrimination Laws: Enact laws against gender- and religion-based discrimination in employment, education, and politics.
- ii. Hate Speech Laws: Reform blasphemy and hate speech laws to prevent misuse against minorities (Shah, 2019).
- iii. Affirmative Action: Introduce gender-sensitive quotas and reserved seats to ensure Christian women's participation in decision-making processes.

7.4 Role of NGOs and the Church

- i. NGO Involvement: NGOs should establish community schools, vocational centers, and platforms for interfaith dialogue.
- ii. Church Leadership: Churches should launch leadership training and peacebuilding initiatives for women to strengthen grassroots voices.

- iii. Partnerships: NGOs and churches should collaborate with the state to promote inclusion and safeguard minority rights.

7.5 AI and Social Media Monitoring

- i. AI-Based Monitoring: Deploy Artificial Intelligence to detect and track hate speech and extremist content on social media platforms (UNDP, 2018).
- ii. Community Reporting: Empower Christian women through digital literacy programs to report online harassment and hate speech.
- iii. Media Regulation: Mandate electronic and print media to highlight the positive contributions of minority communities.

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