



The Intersection of Religion, Public Policy, and Women's Online Activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem: Women's activism through social media in South Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, is shaped by a complex interplay of religion, public policy, and socio-political contexts. While social media offers opportunities for empowerment and advocacy, its role remains contested due to societal barriers, political constraints, and religious influences.

Research Purposes: This study aims to explore the dynamics of women's online activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, examining how socio-economic, political, and religious factors influence their digital engagement. It seeks to identify key challenges and highlight the comparative impact of social media on women's advocacy in these two countries.

Research Methods: The study employs a qualitative approach, using content analysis of secondary data, including reports, academic studies, and media articles. Comparative analysis is applied to evaluate the socio-political and religious factors shaping women's digital activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

Results and Discussion: In Sri Lanka, women benefit from higher literacy rates and a relatively open societal structure, enabling them to use social media effectively for addressing issues like corruption and economic mismanagement. However, ethnic and religious divisions limit cohesive activism. In Afghanistan, women demonstrate resilience by leveraging platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp despite facing severe socio-religious constraints and the Taliban's repressive policies. The analysis underscores the critical role of social media as both a tool for advocacy and a contested space for control and suppression.

Research Implications and Contributions: The study highlights the necessity of addressing structural barriers to enhance women's digital participation. Regional collaboration, improved digital literacy, and international advocacy are recommended to amplify women's voices in both countries. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of religion, public policy, and digital activism, providing insights for policymakers and activists working toward inclusive social progress.

Keywords: Religion, public policy, gender, online activism, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, civil society.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media has become an indispensable platform for sharing information and raising public awareness about various social, political, and economic issues, including women's empowerment. Digitalization, as a result of globalization, has had mixed effects on South Asian societies (Nandy, 2019). Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, WeChat, Viber, Snapchat, and Skype are widely used by individuals, social organizations, political parties, and other forums. These platforms reflect the diversity of their users based on their socio-economic, cultural, and political backgrounds.

The effectiveness of social media as a tool for driving social change heavily depends on the context of the state, including public policies, religious norms, and societal structures. In Sri Lanka, a nation fragmented by decades of ethno-religious civil war and an ongoing financial

crisis, social media plays a vital role in mobilizing women to address pressing social, economic, and political issues. Conversely, Afghanistan, a country scarred by terrorist attacks and restrictive governance under the Taliban, demonstrates how rigid religious norms and policies limiting women's roles significantly impact the use of social media as a platform for activism.

Although Afghan women experienced relative freedom between 2002 and August 15, 2021, technological underdevelopment and a closed societal structure remain significant barriers to their participation in the digital space. Meanwhile, Sri Lankan women have been more active in social movements leveraging social media to build public awareness, as exemplified during the 'Anti-Government Movement' of 2022. These movements underscore the importance of social media in enabling women's participation in the public sphere (McDougall, 2012). The transformative power of social media is further evidenced in global movements like the 'Arab Spring' (2011) and the 'Shahbag Movement' in Bangladesh (2013), where women played prominent roles (Nandy, 2022). In South Asia, the success of activism through social media is influenced by public policies concerning information and communication technology (ICT), religious norms, and societal openness to social change (Khan, 2016).

This paper aims to analyze the role of social media in women's activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, focusing on how public policies and religious norms in both countries shape the extent of women's involvement in social and political issues. Specifically, it seeks to address three research questions: (1) What is the role of social media in women's activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan? (2) What are the challenges women face in using social media as a tool for social change? and (3) How do the socio-economic, political, and religious contexts in both countries influence women's online activism?. Using a content analysis approach, this study combines primary and secondary sources, including reports, books, journals, newspapers, and websites. The research aims to provide insights into the interplay between religion, public policy, and women's roles in digital spaces, highlighting how these factors collectively influence women's activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contextualizing Activism of Women through Social Media

South Asia is a very complicated region in terms of political and societal equations (Nandy, 2019 a). The role of social media in response to socio-political issues is very effective. The activism of women in select South Asian states has been chosen to understand the currents of women's activism through the prism of social media. The mass media is considered the 4th pillar of the modern democratic system. The nature and degree of use of social media depend on some interrelated variables. The interrelationship between society and politics is a reality. In the digital era, social media has been an integral part of society. It is not only a popular digital platform but also an effective tool for social and political change. In the South Asian context, social media has become very popular among the urban youths and middle class. Like other regions of the globe, the people of South Asia have been a bit busy and the habit of dependency on social media for information is being increased gradually. The women of Sri Lanka are very active in social media in giving reactions through social media on various issues. In Afghanistan, from 2002 to mid of 2021, the activism of women through social media was shown within the indigenous socio-religious framework.

By examining the conflicts between historical and modern feminist discourses and adhering to and connecting the crucial linkages between the local and the global, feminist studies explain the intersection of online and offline activity as a rethinking of feminism (Baer, 2016). Arguably, modern digital technology is introducing new types of political action everywhere. The person using the gadget in this situation joins the protest, and both the offline and online movements occupy public space (Samuel, K. et al., 2022). Through a new generation of tools, tactics, and methods to destroy ingrained inequality and enable the realization of a spectrum of rights, digital activism has assisted in expanding the space for consciousness-raising, networking, and mobilizing. These resources include blogs, vlogs,

Tumblr, YouTube, citizen journalism platforms, and social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which are becoming more and more well-liked. As more individuals can now access a variety of programs, like WhatsApp, which are used for a variety of reasons, there has been a rise in activism through mobile devices.

Social media is very effective on humanitarian issues. Social welfare organizations are actively using social media to make awareness of societally pertinent issues and more especially on social justice. Social media enhances communication among individuals. The revolutionary change in the society and political culture of a country can be reshaped through social media. Social media played a very significant role during the COVID-19 in the healthcare sector. Civic awareness has been created through social media, especially YouTube and Facebook in many South Asian countries. In the digital era, the use of social media has increased both positively and negatively. Some individuals and organizations are very active in social media, but the way they are using social media is not acceptable. They used to spread rumors on sensitive issues and provide wrong information. Sometimes, the uncensored pictorial messages and videos are circulated by them which influences the perception of the people wrongly.

Social media plays a very important role in alarming people from natural disasters. For instance, Facebook helps to mark individuals to keep safe in the disaster zones and also helps to inform friends and family members about the safety of the individuals. Social media has a significant role in modern society since it is particularly popular with the middle class and young people in urban areas. Youth and the middle class have strong connections to social media, which has quickly become ingrained in global culture. Social media is therefore inextricably linked to politics and political activism. Politicians have chosen social media as their preferred method of communication with the public because it is favored by a sizable portion of the people.

Women of South Asia are being forwarded and empowered with digital awareness. The participation of women of Sri Lanka in the social and political sphere is relatively better but not satisfactory. Sri Lankan society is plural and a bit more open than Afghanistan. The rate of literacy and employment of Sri Lankan women is comparatively higher than that of Afghan women. However, the various platforms of social media are very popular tools for the activism of women in both countries. For Afghan women, traditionally there are some restrictions on socio-political activism. Additionally, the threat of the Taliban on the activism of women has posed a challenge. The societal structure and economic background are very important in reacting to social media activity by women on a range of issues. During COVID-19, women from both countries used to get involved on social media. The use of social media for personal purposes and giving active reactions on social media are two different things.

The impact of women's activism through social media may not be considered very impactful in a socio-political change of society. The issue of social security for women is a very important aspect for Sri Lankan and Afghan women. Another context of women's activism through social media is ethno-religiosity. Sri Lanka is an ethnically and religiously diverse country with a lot of complexity. The socio-economic conditions of the ethnic majority Sinhala women are socially, economically, and politically privileged than Tamil, and Muslim women. So, the activism of women through social media cannot be put in the same line. In the case of ethnically diverse Afghanistan, the same thing is applicable. The issue of advancement of various ethnic groups of women, such as Tajik, Pashtu, Baloch, and Uzbek depends on the policy of the government and concerned societal rules. So, as the citizens of a backward country, the women of Afghanistan, it is very challenging to show their activism through social media. As a whole, the human security of South Asia is immensely challenging (Nandy and Majee, 2024). Social media can be a very effective tool for South Asian women to raise their voices to ensure human security.

Sri Lankan Case

Sri Lanka is one of the most beautiful island countries in the world with geostrategic importance (Nandy and Naha, 2023). According to the report of UNESCO, the literacy rate of Sri Lankan women is 90.08%. Even though Sri Lanka is a developing country social media usage is increasing day by day with the large number of internet users. Social media has been one of the largest news-sharing media among the young generation in Sri Lanka. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media apps are highly used in this era. Social media allows individuals more freedom to publish and cover news than any other media platform. With the help of social media, the message can reach a bigger audience and connect more people. It can communicate with each person according to their global view,

which might result in the development of any ideology in society. The gender-neutral language used in the 2002 draught of the e-Sri Lanka policy. The empowerment of women is a focus area of this campaign to encourage the use of ICT for development, however, they are included alongside youth, demonstrating the underlying insensitivity to the gendered variations in access to ICT generally.

The use of social media has increased during the financial crisis in Sri Lanka. Although the government had stopped internet services in many sensitive areas to stop sharing information about the protest movement against the government. The women have taken part actively in the anti-government protest movement of Sri Lanka in 2022. Social media played the role of catalyst in connecting people to raise awareness about the wrong economic policy of the government. Through social media, Sri Lankan women got the latest information about the stance of the government, the current economic crisis, the reaction of the people, and the law-and-order situation of the country. Many women who have no necessity to go outside of their residences, also actively or passively get involved in social media for their interests. Social media helped to change social behavior. In recent times, one of the major shortcomings of social media in society is over-dependency on social media.

Many of the social media users used to post unauthentic videos, photos, and messages without any verification which badly affected the society. Many women in Sri Lanka have their YouTube channels and many women are subscribers of these channels. So, the information providers and information recipients are interrelated within a social media network system. Any sort of misinformation or miscommunication is very much harmful to society. Nowadays, social media plays a significant role in changing the perceptions of people. As most women are usually confined to the domestic sphere so, for many of them it is very difficult to compare the actual socio-political and economic scenario of the country. The trend of dependency on social media always cannot be good for social change. There is no doubt, that social media can be immensely helpful in making public opinion. The mainstream media has some responsibility and censorship in broadcasting news, but social media is an informal platform. How social media presents news and how people are reacting and following that is very important.

Political Activism of Women in Sri Lanka Through Social Media

The participation of Sri Lankan women in politics does not reflect the principle of participatory democracy. The participation of women in Sri Lankan politics in comparison with males is very low. In political affairs, women of Sri Lanka are reluctant. Women's rights are affected due to political culture. In the parliament of Sri Lanka, the representation of women is 5.3%. In the provincial Council, the percentage of women representation is less than 5%. In local bodies, 25% of seats are reserved for women. Unfortunately, the National Election Commission of Sri Lanka could not be able to ensure the nomination process of women. In Sri Lanka, there is only one-woman cabinet minister and they've always appointed two women for the state ministries (IFES, 2022). Against the backdrop of women's participation in Sri Lanka politics, it is assumed that feminists and women politicians' political activism of Sri Lankan women is very low.

The political activism of Sri Lankan women through digital media can be seen both quantitatively and qualitatively. Presentations, responsibilities, and treatment of individual and collective political issues through social media depend on socioeconomic conditions, socioeconomic status, daily struggles, various institutional barriers, and interest in politics. The trend of underrepresentation of women occurs at every level due to a different systemic problem. A survey by the Asia Pacific Institute of Digital Marketing revealed that 90% of Sri Lankan internet users access news and information through Facebook, while 85% use YouTube. These percentages are higher than those for traditional news sources such as TV (74%), radio (34%), and newspapers (24%). As the platform with the largest user base, Facebook plays a crucial role in social engagement among citizens. In 2018, the Sri Lankan government temporarily blocked Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Viber in an attempt to mitigate ethnic tensions within the country. Authorities argued that these platforms were being used to provoke violence against the Muslim minority. After riots broke out in the Kandy district, resulting in two deaths and considerable property damage, the government declared a state of emergency.

On Human Rights Issue of Women

Due to the social media movement inside country and outside the country Sri Lankan war crime issue became international and many human rights organizations raised questions about this issue. All

human rights violence and war crime pictures and photographs became viral through social media at first and then it became a concern of matter for the international community. For that matter, many Sri Lankans have been involved from inside and outside the country. Tamil Diasporas are using social media very actively to raise questions about war crimes and human rights violence. From mid-2016 forward, five million Sri Lankans were using Facebook, with more women between the ages of 18 and 24 using the social media platform than males. The predicament in Sri Lanka calls for requestion rights and womanish security. Womanish security communicates the fundamental ideas of feminism, gender equality, and rights to reproductive health. Women prefer to share opinions about security issues that are gender-sensitive on Facebook with more confidence than they do in front of others (Mendis, 2019). In Sri Lanka, Facebook is used as a powerful tool for activism, promoting civic and political engagement and enabling activists to shine a light on uncomfortable truths. It is a safe space in which LGBT and women. Facebook altered that by making it possible for these women and organizations to connect and interact with a wider network quickly and affordably. The majority of those involved, including Sri Lanka-based human rights campaigners, supported the platform and contended that, if handled properly, it had great value for the nation despite Facebook receiving constant public condemnation.

Women's Activism on Social Media During Financial Crisis

Due to mismanagement, misgovernance, wrong economic policy, and mistaken agricultural policy, Sri Lanka has witnessed an acute financial crisis. Mr. Gotabaya Rajapakse, the president of Sri Lanka was responsible for this unprecedented financial crisis. About 22 million people had to suffer due to a shortage of food, fuel, and medicines. The campaign against Rajapakse was picked up in early 2022. The anti-government protest movement was conducted by angry people on social media, especially, posting the incidents on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Interestingly, the active participation of people was found from all ethnic groups (The Hindu, 2023). The proportion of women in the anti-governmental protest movement on the issue of financial crisis paved the movement to a new height. In June, a few dozen activists started meeting regularly at a seaside tented camp in Colombo for hours-long sessions to think up ways to revive Sri Lanka's flagging protest movement. The group, which included a Catholic priest, a digital strategist, and a popular playwright, succeeded beyond their wildest hopes. Within weeks, hundreds of thousands of people descended on Colombo. After initially clashing with police, protesters occupied key government buildings and residences, forcing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his prime minister to promise to step down (Wire, 2022).

Despite facing economic setbacks due to policy mistakes during the pandemic, which led to a shrinking economy for two consecutive years and slow growth projections for 2023-2025, Sri Lanka continues to experience a rapid increase in internet usage, outpacing all of its regional peers. Over the past six years, the number of internet users in Sri Lanka has more than tripled, reaching nearly 40% of the population. This growth is fueled by a robust mobile-first internet economy, which is promoting a variety of innovative applications. Furthermore, the country has seen a significant influx of investment, driven by these trends. In 2022, Sri Lanka has an average of about 8.4 million monthly active social media users, with an annual growth rate of 3.8% between 2021 and 2022. That is about 38.1% of the total population. These social media users spend an average of hours on social media and each has an average account on the platforms (OOSGA, 2023). Sri Lanka's social media market is still in its early stages of development, mainly due to low internet penetration. Despite this, the use of social media is already widespread among people with Internet access.

Activism on Women's Freedom

Women in Sri Lanka have access to education and are aware of their rights. They are often active on the issue of freedom through social media, especially through Facebook and Twitter. Due to government persecution, it is frequently difficult to express one's views, especially regarding the freedom of women. Sri Lanka's access to the internet has been restricted. While social media and communication platforms were not blocked by the government in 2020 or 2021, allowing Sri Lankans to participate in online protests on a variety of subjects, online free speech continued to deteriorate. Increased intimidation and harassment, which are causing more self-censorship and an intimidating environment, are being reported by journalists and activists. Separately, the number of people detained for their online

speech over COVID-19 and environmental concerns grew, and some people were detained by the police without a warrant.

After President Maithripala Sirisena was elected in 2015 to replace the more oppressive Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's political rights and civil freedoms saw gains (Freedom House, 2021). The Mahinda Rajapakse administration-imposed restrictions on social media when people used to criticize the government for restricting the right to expression. The women of Sri Lanka actively criticized the government through social media.

Sri Lankan Case: The Role of Religion and Social Media in Women's Activism

Sri Lanka, an island nation with immense geostrategic importance, is known for its rich cultural and religious diversity, comprising Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians (Nandy and Naha, 2023). According to UNESCO, the literacy rate among Sri Lankan women is 90.08%, indicating their significant potential for active participation in societal issues. Despite being a developing country, the use of social media has grown rapidly, becoming a primary medium for sharing news, raising awareness, and mobilizing communities. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter are widely utilized by various groups, including women advocating for social change.

Religion plays a critical role in shaping the socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka, and it significantly influences women's activism through social media. Many movements, campaigns, and discussions on gender equity, particularly those led by women, intersect with religious narratives. For instance, Buddhist teachings on compassion and social justice have been invoked by women's groups to challenge policies perceived as unjust during the 2022 anti-government protests. Similarly, Muslim women activists have used Islamic principles of justice and fairness to address issues of economic inequality and political corruption, leveraging social media as their platform.

During the financial crisis of 2022, Sri Lankan women actively participated in protests, many of which were coordinated and amplified through social media. Despite government attempts to block internet access in sensitive areas to suppress dissent, women from diverse religious backgrounds used digital platforms to voice their grievances. These platforms enabled them to connect across religious and ethnic divides, demonstrating a collective resistance against economic mismanagement and advocating for transparent governance.

However, the intersection of religion and social media is not without challenges. For instance, religious institutions have occasionally resisted the use of social media by women, particularly when activism is perceived to contradict traditional roles prescribed by religious norms. While some religious leaders have supported women's digital activism, others have expressed concerns about the "westernization" of values propagated through social media.

Social media also served as a platform for interfaith dialogue among women activists, encouraging solidarity across religious lines in addressing socio-economic and political issues. Women-led groups have emphasized religious tolerance and coexistence, advocating for policies that uphold these values. However, the misuse of social media, including the spread of misinformation and sectarian content, has occasionally fueled religious tensions, undermining efforts to promote unity.

This duality highlights the complex role of religion in women's online activism. While religious teachings can inspire and legitimize activism, societal interpretations of religion often restrict women's roles in public life. Social media, as an informal platform, amplifies both progressive and conservative narratives, making it a double-edged sword in the struggle for gender equality and social justice.

Through their activism, Sri Lankan women—particularly those confined to domestic roles due to societal expectations—have demonstrated the potential of social media to foster meaningful dialogue and action. However, balancing religious sensitivities and the open nature of digital platforms remains a critical challenge for achieving sustainable social change.

Afghanistan Case

Afghanistan is a poor, infrastructurally backward, socially blocked, politically unstable, and terrorist country, where women's participation in socio-political and economic affairs is very rare. After the 2001 revolution and the American occupation of Afghanistan, the Afghan people were given some of their basic rights and freedoms to establish a government based on democracy and freedom. Civil society in Afghanistan is immature, with a very small percentage of women. The presence, role, and

activism of women during the 20 years of democracy are considered an important and valuable achievement, which has always been affirmed by the Afghan government and the international community. This presence, participation, and activity in the media are also undeniable. Women began to appear in the socio-political activities of science in 2002 when the government led by Hamid Karzai came to power. After 2001, women's rights were again protected, schools were built, infrastructure was restored, a promising political system was implemented, and women's rights were protected. The increase in the number of female journalists in the media gives women more opportunities. The role of civil society is very important for any movement. Unfortunately, the civil society of Afghanistan is not mature and vibrant (Nandy, 2020).

To influence legislation, public discourse, and opinion. Although women's participation in the public arena was limited under Taliban rule (1996-2001). By the end of 2012, women made up 25% of Afghanistan's national media professionals. Women gradually started to influence legislation, public discourse, and opinion. The general public's debate on women's and girls' roles in society is significantly influenced by the mainstream media. Radio and television programs are gradually and not so subtly changing conservative opinions on touchy issues including domestic violence, child marriage, and the role of women outside the home was also notably increased. But for working female journalists Afghanistan is always a very dangerous place. The women of Afghanistan, especially, urban advanced women gradually became accustomed to social media. On several issues, they used to respond. Against this backdrop, this section will delineate the activism of Afghan women through social media on several issues.

Traditional patriarchal standards in Afghanistan govern gender interactions, with women expected to completely obey and be subject to male family members. The idea of 'honor' is vital, and a woman is considered to carry the 'honor' of her family through her body, sexuality, name, and even her appearance. Men have the authority to decide how women are treated and what their roles are in the home and society at large. For example, a father may decide if his daughter should marry, go to school, and how she should dress in public. But deepening on class, ethnicity, location, and economic, social, and political standing, the scope and bounds of the control differ. Only 29.81% of Afghan women are literate (Country Economy, 2018). Illiteracy is the key factor in the backwardness of Afghan women. Human security in Afghanistan is severely violated (Nandy, 2024).

Response of Afghan Women to Terrorism through Social Media

After nearly two decades of war, a new generation of Afghans has grown up with a strong sense of social and political responsibility. However, as peaceful public protest remains dangerous, they increasingly use social media to participate in political activities. The women of Afghanistan also participated actively in the protest movement in-person or through social media. In July 2016, two suicide bombers attacked a protest in Kabul, killing 83 civilians and wounding more than 230 others. In June 2017, another protest in the capital ended when Afghan security forces allegedly shot and killed seven demonstrators. A triple bombing during the funeral of the protesters killed 20 civilians. The administration was accused of neglecting to address security concerns by more than 1,000 demonstrators. They appealed to the global community to pressure the Afghan government to step down. Many protesters including women expressed their anxiety about the terrorism in the country through social media. Many of them criticized the Hamid Karzai government as unable to manage Afghanistan and failed to control terrorism (BBC, 2017). Women's responses on social media were observed in the wake of this terrible event. Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) and Afghan conflicts have been documented by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) 207 times since January 2017. Because of the constant terrorist strikes, Afghan women utilize social media less frequently than males do when discussing terrorist incidents.

The effectiveness of Twitter was predicted in Afghanistan when Afghans tweeted that the government and the international community should not agree to release the Taliban. Some Twitter posts have become very popular. For example, a message about liberating the Taliban was spread with a hashtag. In anticipation of possible Taliban attacks and violence, the Twitter account was banned (Mehrdad, 2020). Many educated urban women participated in Twitting on socially important topics. Some Afghans including women, posted horrific photographs of Taliban attacks primarily vehicle bombings on Twitter. The public urged the government to stand firm in the impending talks with the

Taliban, calling for guarantees for democracy, gender equality, and free expression in particular. Expertise, insight, and rationale are not necessary while discussing the Taliban. Many Afghan-educated women stated on Twitter that instead of dozens of books and articles explaining why they are murderers, criminals, and enemies who should never be allowed to resign power, our memories, sorrows, cries, anger, and tears that have never been dried up can.

Political Activism

The use of social media by Afghan women activists to improve their participation in public life is highlighted in new research (World Movement for Democracy, 2018). About 9% of people use social media, and they tend to be urban, young, and educated. Despite their relatively low usage, women have started to use online forums to participate in and frequently take the lead in public discussions on social and political problems. Using social media Tahmina Arian and her friends started the advocacy campaign 'Where is my name'. The campaign draws attention to the prevalent Afghan practice of men not using women's names in official or informal contexts. The campaign's objective is to shatter this taboo and support women in being acknowledged as autonomous individuals with unique identities. The hashtag sparked discussion in the public sphere, attracted attention internationally, and developed into an enduring movement. The enormous corruption by the leaders of Afghanistan has made the country economically poor (Nandy and Mamun, 2024). The women of Afghanistan can't raise their voices through social media due to the Taliban regime.

Fawzia Koof will become the first female deputy speaker of Afghanistan's parliament and one of four female negotiators who sat down face-to-face with the Taliban to discuss the country's future in 2020. A lifelong fighter for democracy and rights. Among Afghan women and girls, Fawzia is currently in exile. The world can learn from Afghanistan's experience on women, peace, and security. Women must be included in all peace negotiations from the beginning, and they must be included in a meaningful way. And women never give up. They continue to resist, demand their demands and demand their freedom. The international community must continue to use its influence to restore women's right to political participation, restore the rule of law and restore the democracy we have lost. Fawzia said people around the world must continue to stand in solidarity with us, use their platform to raise their voices and pressure their government to do more for the people of Afghanistan. Dissatisfied, he mentioned that he had lost his political and social status and identity. Fawzia also said that she has not lost hope. We are a very hopeful nation. People's constant demand for a better life gives me hope (UN Women, 2022). Women's political activism in Afghanistan is not that strong, but Fawzi encourages Afghan women.

The difficult situation of women in Afghanistan was observed during the so-called democratic governments (2002-2020). Because of the Taliban, Afghan women faced socio-political, economic, and security problems. Without securing their status from the Taliban, Afghan women cannot exercise political rights. The patriarchal social structure challenges women to be politically active (Reddy, 2014). Social media is an effective tool for activism. It is quite difficult for Afghan women to do political activism on social networks. Since 2002, many women have opened an account on Facebook to express their political opinions. By August 2021, women were using Facebook to coordinate protests and seek justice. In many sensitive political issues, women could not express their opinions due to the restrictions of traditional patriarchal society. Some men use Facebook to harass women by posting pornographic images. Receiving threats and unethical messages from men, women's political activism through Facebook is often limited. Facebook helped women express their views on women's issues and cover social and political events. Many Afghan women created Facebook accounts under a pseudonym associated with a male identity. Because their family members are harshly against Facebook (Nader, 2020). They thought that if a girl had a Facebook account, she broke the tradition of society.

Activism for Women's Rights

Afghanistan has many problems, especially for women. The Taliban targeted women who were very active on social media during the regimes of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. Women who were very active on social networks were harassed by the Taliban regime. Naseri, an Afghan lady, had the experience of being tortured by the Taliban. Shortly after the Taliban came to power in August 2021, he had to move from house to house to avoid arrest by the Taliban authorities. He was accused of raising his voice against the Taliban. Through Facebook, she sought to protect Afghan women who faced

increasing marginalization since the Taliban came to power in August 2021. The Taliban tried to arrest him twice but failed because he turned off his cell phone (Kranz, 2022). The scope of Afghan women's activism is limited due to a lack of technology and socio-economic backwardness. It shrunk because of the Taliban. Social security for women is a big challenge due to some risk factors. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, women's employment dropped by 28 percent. According to Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, rates of domestic violence forced amputations, torture of peaceful female protesters and other gender-based violence have risen sharply since the group's return to power. The organization Duniya established a popular network promoting democratic values in 20 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Some female activists are active on social media under pseudonyms on issues related to women. The question is, how long can Afghan women be active on social media? In Afghanistan, the government and society do not favor prosperous women.

Activism for Freedom

Some of the Afghan ladies decided to protest the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021. They decided to create a group – ‘Powerful Women’ to continue protesting against the Taliban. The Afghan women have created a Facebook account collectively titled ‘Women for Afghan Women’. There are more than 22 thousand followers across the globe. This Facebook account is used to post various challenges of Afghan women in enjoying their freedom. Afghan women continuously demonstrate against the Taliban government’s limitations. The new Taliban administration is incredibly chauvinist and is founded on a rigid application of Islamic law that minimizes women’s identities by making their presence in any public area invisible.

The Afghan women demanded to wear clothes of their choice maintaining the tradition of Afghan society. To promote the country’s actual cultural diversity, numerous Afghan women have organized a campaign through social media that spread pictures of people wearing vibrant traditional Afghan clothing. Under the hashtags # Do Not Touch My Clothes and # Afghan Culture (Sanz, 2021).

On October 20, 2022, some Afghan women and their families, including young children were unjustly jailed. Threats, beatings, hazardous imprisonment circumstances, denial of due process, harsh release conditions, and other abuses were committed against them. The officials beat up and shocked male relatives who were being held. Tamana Paryani, one of the initial dissidents unlawfully imprisoned by the Taliban, recorded herself when they burst into her home at night in pursuit of her. She then instantly shared the footage on social media (Human Rights Watch 2022). The women claimed that Paryani’s kidnapping brought on waves of panic.

Afghanistan Case: The Role of Religion and Social Media in Women’s Activism

Afghanistan is a country marked by poverty, infrastructural underdevelopment, social constraints, political instability, and the pervasive influence of terrorism. These factors have historically limited women's participation in socio-political and economic affairs. Under the Taliban regime (1996–2001), women's roles were strictly confined, and their access to education, work, and public life was severely restricted. However, following the 2001 intervention and the subsequent establishment of a democratic government under Hamid Karzai, significant progress was made in promoting women’s rights. This included the rebuilding of schools, restoration of infrastructure, and the implementation of a political system that provided a foundation for women’s participation in society.

Religion, deeply embedded in Afghanistan’s socio-political fabric, plays a dual role in shaping women's rights and activism. Traditional interpretations of Islamic principles have often been used to justify patriarchal structures, where women are expected to embody family "honor" and submit to male authority. A father, for example, may control decisions regarding his daughter’s education, marriage, and public appearance, based on societal norms grounded in religious and cultural values. These rigid interpretations limit women's autonomy and their ability to engage in public life. Despite these constraints, progressive religious narratives advocating for gender equity have also emerged, offering a counter-narrative to support women's empowerment.

During the 20 years of democracy (2001–2021), Afghan women began to gain visibility in socio-political and media spheres, particularly in urban areas. By 2012, women constituted 25% of Afghanistan’s national media professionals, using traditional and digital platforms to challenge societal norms and raise awareness about issues such as domestic violence, child marriage, and women’s rights

to education and work. Social media became an essential tool for women's activism, particularly for urban, educated women who used platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to express their opinions and advocate for change. These platforms allowed women to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly influence public discourse on controversial topics, such as the role of women in society and gender-based violence.

However, the return of the Taliban in 2021 marked a regression in women's rights. Restrictions on women's access to education, work, and public spaces have intensified, and the use of social media for activism has become increasingly dangerous. Women who use digital platforms to advocate for their rights face threats, harassment, and persecution, highlighting the risks associated with online activism in such a restrictive environment. Despite these challenges, Afghan women continue to leverage social media to voice their concerns, document human rights abuses, and connect with international audiences.

The activism of Afghan women through social media reflects the intersection of religion, public policy, and societal norms. While religion is often invoked to limit women's roles, many women activists reinterpret Islamic principles to advocate for gender equity and social justice. For instance, they emphasize Quranic teachings on education and justice to challenge patriarchal norms and demand access to education and public life. This demonstrates how religious narratives can be reimagined to support women's activism in a deeply conservative society.

The low literacy rate among Afghan women, at just 29.81% (Country Economy, 2018), remains a significant barrier to their effective use of social media. Illiteracy, compounded by limited access to information and communication technology, restricts women's ability to participate in digital activism. Moreover, the patriarchal nature of Afghan society often discourages women from engaging in public discourse, both online and offline. Despite these limitations, social media serves as a critical platform for urban Afghan women to influence public opinion and advocate for legislative change.

The role of social media in women's activism in Afghanistan underscores the importance of civil society, even in its nascent form. Religious and societal norms continue to dictate the boundaries of women's participation in public life, but the use of digital platforms offers a glimmer of hope for challenging these restrictions. Afghan women's ability to reinterpret religious principles and utilize social media to amplify their voices highlights the potential for digital spaces to serve as catalysts for social change, even in the face of severe limitations.

Exploring the Dynamics of Religion, Policy, and Women's Digital Activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan

Social media serves as a crucial platform for women's activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, shaped by the intricate interplay of religion, public policy, and societal norms. In both countries, digital platforms provide opportunities for women to challenge systemic inequities and advocate for their rights, though the extent and nature of this activism differ significantly.

In Sri Lanka, women's online activism thrives within a pluralistic society where Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities coexist. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter enable women to mobilize for socio-political causes and foster interfaith dialogue. During the 2022 anti-government protests, Sri Lankan women used social media to critique flawed economic policies and mobilize diverse communities for collective action. The role of religion in shaping activism is notable, as Buddhist teachings on compassion and justice have been invoked by activists to support equitable governance. Similarly, Muslim women have used Islamic principles to address issues of economic inequality. These religious frameworks intersect with public policies that promote digital literacy, allowing women to engage effectively in the digital space.

Afghanistan presents a more challenging environment for women's online activism, with socio-religious norms and restrictive public policies significantly limiting women's participation. Despite low literacy rates (29.81% among women) and Taliban-imposed restrictions, Afghan women have leveraged platforms like Facebook and Twitter to raise awareness about issues such as education and gender-based violence. Campaigns like "Where Is My Name" illustrate how women reinterpret Islamic teachings to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for their rights. While these efforts demonstrate resilience, Afghan women face immense risks, including harassment and persecution. Social media serves as both a platform for advocacy and a lifeline to connect with international allies, highlighting its dual role in amplifying women's voices and providing a measure of protection.

Women in both Sri Lanka and Afghanistan encounter challenges such as online harassment, censorship, and digital inequality. The spread of misinformation and the lack of robust digital literacy programs exacerbate these issues, undermining the potential of social media as a tool for meaningful activism. In Sri Lanka, ethno-religious disparities influence the effectiveness of women's activism. While Sinhala women benefit from greater access to resources, Tamil and Muslim women often struggle for visibility and recognition. Additionally, the over-reliance on social media sometimes leads to performative activism that lacks tangible outcomes. Afghan women face severe restrictions rooted in societal and religious norms. The Taliban's authoritarian policies have further marginalized women, making digital activism a perilous endeavor. Despite these challenges, urban Afghan women have shown remarkable adaptability by using encrypted platforms and pseudonymous accounts to express dissent and demand change.

Sri Lanka's higher literacy rate and urbanization levels provide a more conducive environment for digital engagement. In contrast, Afghanistan's widespread poverty and low literacy rates significantly hinder women's access to technology and online platforms. Sri Lanka's relative political stability allows for greater online advocacy, while Afghanistan's volatile political landscape, dominated by the Taliban, poses substantial risks for women's online activism. Public policies in Afghanistan often reinforce patriarchal norms, restricting women's freedom to engage in digital spaces. Religion is a key factor shaping women's online activism in both countries. In Sri Lanka, religious narratives often support social justice movements, while in Afghanistan, women reinterpret Islamic teachings to advocate for gender equity. However, conservative interpretations of religion in both contexts frequently serve as barriers to women's empowerment.

Research by Baer (2016) underscores the transformative potential of digital platforms for marginalized groups, aligning with observations in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Sri Lankan women's use of social media demonstrates a balance between grassroots activism and institutional engagement, while Afghan women's efforts emphasize covert strategies to navigate systemic oppression. Samuel et al. (2022) highlight how digital activism reshapes political engagement, a phenomenon evident in both countries. Afghan women's campaigns, such as "Where Is My Name," reflect this trend by challenging societal norms and sparking global conversations about gender equality. Recent studies also stress the importance of international solidarity in amplifying Afghan women's voices.

An Indian government representative in *The Hindu* (2023) emphasized the role of digital literacy in empowering women across South Asia. The official advocated for regional cooperation to address digital inequalities and enhance women's access to technology. Similarly, *The Times of India* (2023) highlighted the importance of international advocacy to support Afghan women, noting that digital platforms serve as vital tools for connecting them with global allies.

Social media represents a transformative tool for women's activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, offering platforms for advocacy and mobilization despite significant challenges. Sri Lanka's relatively open environment allows for broader participation, while Afghan women's resilience in the face of systemic repression highlights the power of digital activism to foster change. Addressing structural barriers, fostering regional collaboration, and leveraging global support are essential steps toward empowering women's voices in these contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex interplay between religion, public policy, and women's online activism in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Social media emerges as a vital yet contested tool for empowering women, enabling them to challenge systemic inequities and advocate for their rights. In Sri Lanka, a relatively open societal structure and higher literacy rates have allowed women to use social media for mobilizing action on issues like corruption and economic mismanagement. However, ethnic and religious divisions often fragment these efforts, limiting the potential for cohesive activism. The misuse of social media to spread hate and deepen social divides further complicates its role in fostering meaningful social change. In Afghanistan, the situation is markedly different. Women's digital activism reflects extraordinary resilience amid systemic oppression and socio-religious constraints. Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp have served as vital lifelines for Afghan women to voice their struggles and connect with the global community. Yet, the repressive policies of the Taliban regime and pervasive societal patriarchy severely restrict the scope of such activism. The stark disparities in digital access,

political freedom, and social mobility between Sri Lanka and Afghanistan underscore how socio-political contexts shape the role and impact of social media.

The intersection of religion and public policy further defines the boundaries of women's online activism in both countries. While religious narratives in Sri Lanka occasionally support social justice movements, conservative interpretations in Afghanistan often serve as barriers to empowerment. Despite these challenges, women in both nations demonstrate remarkable adaptability in leveraging digital platforms to advocate for change. Addressing the structural and systemic barriers that hinder women's online activism is crucial. Regional collaboration, improved digital literacy programs, and international solidarity can amplify women's voices and foster inclusive progress. Social media's transformative potential lies in its ability to bridge divides, but its effectiveness ultimately depends on creating environments that support women's rights and their active participation in society. The cases of Sri Lanka and Afghanistan illustrate that while digital platforms offer significant opportunities, their impact remains intricately tied to the broader socio-political and religious contexts in which they operate.

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