



COMMENT

Written Out of History: Collective Reflection with Oral History Narrators on Pakistan's Women Constitution-Makers

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Abstract

This Comment derives from a group discussion, generously funded by the Transactions Workshop Grant in 2023, to reflect retrospectively on the nature and degree of interaction among six trailblazing women members of Pakistan's constituent assembly of 1972–3 ('women constitution-makers') within and without the assembly against the backdrop of their life histories. I refer to this group discussion as a 'collective reflection' to describe its open-ended structure of snowballing conversations among a small cohort of oral history narrators on the women constitution-makers as well as archivists whose work engages with material on or related to Pakistan's enduring Constitution of 1973. The objective of the collective reflection was twofold: to provide an interactive mnemonic context for storytelling on the women constitution-makers and their personal and political associations; and to explore the extent to which these six women acted in concert in their constitution-making role on the question of women's political representation. In relation to the former, the collective reflection yielded valuable observations. With respect to the latter, however, it presented a mixed picture and struck a note of caution in reading strong inferences into documentary archives – in this case, the constituent assembly debates.

Keywords: oral history; collective reflection; women constitution-makers

Abstract

This Comment derives from a group discussion, generously funded by the Transactions Workshop Grant in 2023, to reflect on the nature and degree of interaction among six trailblazing women members of Pakistan's constituent assembly of 1972–3 ('women constitution-makers') within and without the assembly against the backdrop of their life histories. The primary interlocutors of the group discussion, or 'collective reflection' as I refer to it, consisted of a small cohort of second-hand oral history narrators on the women constitution-makers. The latter died well before their life histories

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could be documented in their own voices. As these women have remained invisible in history for the past five decades despite having been in the public eye, the oral histories represent an attempt to recover their stories before all living memory of them fades. The collective reflection, on the other hand, was intended as an additional, albeit *exploratory*, method to bring these second-hand narratives into conversation with each other in the process of reconstructing one specific aspect of the missing past: the interpersonal and political links and alliances among the women constitution-makers. The possibility that these interrelationships may have played a role in these women's political action for constitutional reform arose from a reading of the constituent assembly debates, the main official archival record of constitution-making. As such, the collective reflection was conceived more as a forum for filling the gaps in this documentary archive regarding the relational politics of the women constitution-makers, and much less as a method for generating historical knowledge per se.

The focus of this Comment is not on dissecting the oral histories – an important undertaking in its own right – but on assessing the value of adding a reflective method to an oral history project based on second-hand knowledge. The purpose of such a method would be to gain insights on the collective or community dynamics of the subjects that would otherwise not be possible through individual life histories alone. Thus, the objective of the present collective reflection was twofold: to provide an interactive mnemonic context for storytelling on the personal and political associations of the women constitution-makers; and to explore the extent to which these six women acted in concert in their constitution-making role on issues of women's political representation. The open-ended structure of snowballing conversations among the narrators was meant to reinforce a neutral starting point on these issues, presuming neither contradiction nor corroboration on the question of coordinated action in constitution-making. In relation to the objective of aiding memory, the collective reflection yielded some important positive observations. With respect to gap-filling, however, it presented a mixed picture and struck a note of caution in reading strong inferences into documentary archives – in this case, the constituent assembly debates.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part briefly lays out the background context to the oral history project on Pakistan's women constitution-makers, and provides a scoping of the scholarly literature that serves as the point of departure for the project. Because the collective reflection was essentially necessitated by *second-hand* knowledge in the oral histories on the women constitution-makers, a core concern of the first part is to engage with the methodological considerations and challenges relating to this defining feature of the project. The second part introduces the six women constitution-makers and locates them within their ideological orientations and political associations on the basis of current knowledge. It then sketches the process of reading the constituent assembly debates that led to the hypothesis that the six women collaborated in constitution-making, and explains how this hypothesis became the motivation for designing a collective reflection with the contemporary oral history narrators on these women. The third part expands on the structure, objectives and findings of the collective reflection. It sheds light on both the potentialities and limitations of the collective reflection with a view to thinking more generally about using reflective methods in historical research to: (i) complement second-hand oral histories that have a nexus with a common endeavour, and (ii) clarify gaps or test assumptions and inferences arising from documentary archives.

Whither women? Second-hand oral histories as quarries for recovering the past

In February 1972, six women were indirectly elected to the reserve seats allocated to women in Pakistan's constituent assembly, known as the National Assembly.¹ At the time, Pakistan was in the throes of its most challenging crisis since Partition in 1947: the secession of East Bengal, a marginalised region of the country that comprised more than half its total population. The secession came on the heels of a chain of events precipitated by a radical movement against the decade-long military dictatorship of Ayub Khan (1958–69). This 'anti-Ayub movement', as it was called, compelled the succeeding military regime under Yahya Khan (1969–71) to hold Pakistan's first direct general election in 1970 on the basis of 'one man one vote'. The election outcome, in the form of a sweeping majority in East Bengal, turned the military's electoral strategy on its head and posed an immediate threat to the regime's interests. A breakdown in political negotiations between the Yahya regime and the Bengali nationalist party, Awami League, led to a brutal military operation in the province, war with neighbouring India, and military surrender to the Indian army in late 1971.² The political government that came to power in residual Pakistan had as its primary task the transition from martial law to a new constitutional settlement. Paradoxically, this transition was to be achieved by a truncated constituent assembly that drew its democratic legitimacy from elections held under a martial law instrument known as the Legal Framework Order of 1970 (or 'LFO').³ The reserve seats for women in the LFO were distributed on a population basis across the four provinces of Punjab, Sindh, North-West Frontier Province ('NWFP') and Balochistan,⁴ and were conditional on and filled in proportion to the party composition in the assembly.⁵

Curiously, the presence of these six women constitution-makers in the assembly was not obvious to me when I began to study constitution-making history in Pakistan a few years ago. They were entirely missing in the literature from the period. Their existence would only be apparent to someone reading the constituent assembly debates (the 'Debates') in tandem with an official pamphlet briefly profiling assembly members.⁶ My examination of the Debates put me on the path to discovering the political voices and vision of these six trailblazing women and their contributions

¹The National Assembly was simultaneously the constituent assembly and the central legislature.

²See generally, H. Feldman, *The End and the Beginning: Pakistan 1969–1971* (Oxford, 1975).

³Legal Framework Order, 1970 (President's Order No. 2 of 1970), Gazette of Pakistan, Extraordinary, 30 Mar. 1970.

⁴There were originally thirteen reserve seats for women in the LFO, a simple majority of seven being allocated to East Bengal. Historically, this was the highest quota of women's seats in Pakistan's central legislature. There were two women in the first assembly, none in the second, and six during the Ayub dictatorship across East and West Pakistan collectively. 'Women Political Participation: A Gender Audit of Women Representation in Legislative Assemblies of Pakistan', *National Endowment for Democracy (NED)*, Dec. 2019, <https://www.wise.pk/webfiles/1/0/7/Gender%20Audit%20of%20Women%20Representation%20in%20Legislative%20Assemblies%20of%20Pakistan.pdf>.

⁵None of the women who directly contested in the general election won a seat in the assembly. Thus, all women constitution-makers entered the assembly through the pre-determined reserve seats in the LFO.

⁶Who's Who in the National Assembly of Pakistan, (n.d.), Government of Pakistan. This document is not in public circulation. A digital copy was made available to me on request by the Secretariat Library of the National Assembly in 2019.

to constitution-making. I sought to complement this primary documentary source through oral histories obtained through these women's living relatives, colleagues and friends, who have intimate knowledge of their life histories.

Having previously dealt only with first-hand oral history narratives in my research, I was acutely aware of some of the methodological challenges that second-hand oral histories could pose. The most obvious of these is what I refer to as *memory substitution*: the possibility that the narrators in this case were at times substituting their own personal memories for those of the subject. The unreliability and mutability of memory aside, this introduced an additional element of *projection* of the narrator's own experience, exposure, perspective and identity onto the representations of both the subject and the past in general. Another potential challenge was that the oral histories – some, if not all – were likely to comment upon the *personal* life histories of the subjects to the exclusion of observations on the key concern of the project, namely, their political role and the rich and complex details of their contributions to constitution-making. While recognising these challenges, I was nonetheless compelled to set them against the much bigger problem of the erasure of women constitution-makers from both the historical record and the historiography on constitution-making and the struggle for women's representation. Between reconciling to the erasure, and critically qualifying the nature of historical knowledge adduced from these second-hand oral histories, I opted for the latter.

A quick appraisal of the state of the literature in which I locate the oral history project on women constitution-makers is in order here to convey the full extent of the historical gap. The year before I embarked on the project in 2022, Bangladesh commemorated fifty years of its War of Liberation from Pakistan. Even so, histories of Pakistan, whether nationalist or critical, written during these five decades have, with few exceptions, maintained an indelible focus on the Partition of 1947 and its aftermath as the founding moment of state-making and nation-building.⁷ In the past decade alone, there has been a revival of history-writing on Partition, with an emphasis on 'histories-from-below' that attempt to recover the experiences of ordinary people, in contradistinction to the conventional historiography on high politics.⁸ In parallel with this revival there is also a growing body of sociolegal and constitutional scholarship on the early decades of Pakistan.⁹ Set against this intellectual landscape, the historical void on the 'second partition' of 1971 has only very recently begun to receive comparable attention, although primarily through the lenses of war, violence and foreign

⁷For two major representative works straddling this period, see Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge, 1990); Ali Usman Qasmi, *Qaum, Mulk, Sultanat: Citizenship and National Belonging in Pakistan* (Stanford, 2023).

⁸Prominent works in this category include: V. Fazila and Z. Yaqoob-Ali, *The Long Partition and the Making of South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York, 2007); A. Zakaria, *The Footprints of Partition: Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis and Indians* (2015); P. Virdee, *From the Ashes of 1947* (Cambridge, 2018).

⁹See e.g. M. Malagodi, 'Dominion status and the origins of authoritarian constitutionalism in Pakistan', *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17 (2019), 1235–57; S. Aziz and M. Cheema, 'From Nation to State: Constitutional Founding in Pakistan', in *Constitutional Foundings in South Asia*, ed. K. Y. L. Tan and R. Hoque (2021), 63.

relations.¹⁰ This wave of scholarship on 1971 is yet to extend its concerns to questions of larger social and political transformation in the post-1971 era. Arguably, there already exists a substantial corpus of research on the 1970s, but this is centred almost entirely on political science themes of government, political parties and civil–military relations, and political biographies and memoirs.¹¹ However, long missing from this picture are pivotal questions of a socio-historical and constitutional nature that foreground the project of nationalist reconstruction in the 1970s, not least because it was underwritten by a new constitution made by Pakistan’s first popularly elected assembly.¹²

The subject matter of this Comment – the women constitution-makers of Pakistan – is situated within this nascent historiography on 1971 and a very narrowly defined research agenda on its aftermath in Pakistan that eschews a serious study of constitution-making. But much as the male protagonists from the 1970s are well-known political figures that appear across a host of documentary archives and materials, the women constitution-makers have been all but effaced from historical memory. More astonishingly, neither do they find more than a passing mention, if that, in the feminist history of women’s political participation in Pakistan.¹³ This lacuna is all the more confounding when one considers, as I demonstrate below, that the Debates leave no ambiguity on the point that virtually all provisions on women’s rights, protection and political participation in the original Constitution of 1973 (‘Constitution’) were tabled and/or authored by the women constitution-makers. A nuanced explanation for this is outside the scope of this work, but suffice it to say that the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq that succeeded to power in 1977 through a coup and suspended the Constitution for eight long years had much to do with the suppression, distortion and destruction of the historical record relating to constitution-making.

Thus, the project on women constitution-makers, despite the limitations noted above, will make an original contribution to historical scholarship on both constitution-making and women’s representation. It will also make a significant intervention in the burgeoning field of oral history in Pakistan. This is another arena where Partition studies dominate,¹⁴ although there are now a plethora of other themes joining the conversation, such as 1971,¹⁵ women in public service,¹⁶ and countless others.

¹⁰See e.g. G. J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York, 2013); A. Zakaria, *1971: A People’s History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India* (New York, 2019).

¹¹Some representative works in this category include S. J. Burki, *Pakistan Under Bhutto 1971–1977* (Basingstoke, 1980); R. Raza, *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Pakistan, 1967–1977* (Oxford, 1997); P. E. Jones, *The Pakistan People’s Party: Rise to Power* (Oxford, 2003).

¹²See M. S. Khan, ‘What’s in a Founding? Founding Moments and Pakistan’s “Permanent” Constitution of 1973’, in *Founding Moments in Constitutionalism*, ed. R. Albert et al. (2019), 201.

¹³See e.g. R. Saigol, ‘Feminism and the Women’s Movement in Pakistan: Actors, Debates and Strategies’ (FES Country Study, 2016).

¹⁴See e.g. The Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP); The 1947 Partition Archive, Stanford University; P. Virdee, ‘Negotiating the Past: Journey through Muslim Women’s Experience of Partition and Resettlement in Pakistan’, *Cultural and Social History*, 6 (2009), 467–83.

¹⁵See Y. Saikia, ‘War as History, Humanity in Violence: Women, Men, and Memories of Violence of 1971, East Pakistan/Bangladesh’, in *Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones: From the Ancient World to the Era of Human Rights*, ed. E. D. Heineman (2011), 152; Zakaria, 1971.

¹⁶See S. Haroon, ‘Women’s Participation in the Central Superior Services of Pakistan 1973–2020’, *Contemporary South Asia*, 31 (2023), 193–206; S. Haroon and S. A. M. Ali, ‘Creating an Oral History Archive

Common to most of these oral history projects is the concern with incorporating voices of underrepresented people or groups, especially women, as well as testimonies of survivors of traumatic or violent events. The Pakistan women constitution-makers project at once builds on this trend by bringing women to the centre stage of history and strikes out in a different direction by claiming space in oral history for invisibilised women in 'high politics'. While these women were mostly from middle-class and elite sections of society, to suggest that these accounts are likely to reproduce a conventional frame of elite-centric history is to elide the complex reality of how women navigate the corridors of power. The following discussion takes a closer look at this dynamic through the archival lens of the Debates.

Hypothesising women's solidarity in constitution-making

From the perspective of constitution-making, what struck me about the Debates from a bare textual reading was a strong inference that the women members cooperated in particular on the issue of greater political representation for women across different political institutions in the new constitution. This proposition seemed to hold true despite differences of class, region, ideology or party affiliation, and also despite disagreements on other issues. On the basis of this inference, I wished to explore the hypothesis that the women constitution-makers acted in collaboration, whether in a loose strategic sense or on a deeper level of coalition-building, on the question of women's representation.

Quite apart from the inference drawn from the Debates, an external factor influenced the formulation of my hypothesis. This had more to do with my own positionality as a researcher on constitutional politics than with observations from the archive. I had in mind the example in recent history of a highly successful cross-party women's parliamentary caucus in Pakistan that became the driving force behind a spate of legislation related to gender equality and gender-based violence. The immediate cause for the emergence of this caucus was the introduction of a 17 per cent quota for women's seats in parliament – the highest in Pakistan's history – by the military government of General Pervez Musharraf in the early 2000s. Combined with a push from the international donor community to recruit more women across political institutions, including local government, the enlarged reserve seats in the assemblies created the space for women to organise across party lines for women-friendly reform.¹⁷ I was conscious that this contemporary development may add an element of hindsight bias in the inferences I was drawing from the Debates, which only lent more weight to the necessity for corroboration. The first step in this direction was oral histories on the women constitution-makers, which quickly developed into an ongoing project. More often than not, however, and for reasons I discuss below, the oral histories have been much more beneficial in producing life histories than focused conversations on these women's role in constitution-making.

of Government Work: The Women in Public Service Pakistan Project', *The Oral History Review*, 51 (2024), 155–78.

¹⁷A. Khan and S. Naqvi, 'Dilemmas of Representation: Women in Pakistan's Assemblies', *Asian Affairs*, 51 (2020), 286–306. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03068374.2020.1748414>.

In this section, I detail my observations from the Debates that led to hypothesising about women's solidarity in the constitution-making process on matters of political representation. I complete my train of thought with a brief consideration of the gap between the Debates and the oral histories, and how this segued into the collective reflection.

Constituent assembly debates

The assembly that made Pakistan's Constitution was convened in April 1972, and completed the task of constitution-making exactly a year later, in April 1973. The first step in this process was the formation of a 25-member Constitution Committee representing all political parties and groups in the assembly that was to agree on a draft constitution. The draft was to be presented for extensive debate and deliberation in the assembly, and converted into a constitution bill after incorporating all the agreed amendments. If passed by a simple majority of the assembly, the new constitution was to be promulgated through presidential assent. The proceedings of the Constitution Committee have not yet been declassified, although the government announced during the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Constitution in April 2023 that these would be released to the public in the near future. The only detailed and systematic written record of the process exists in the form of political accords between the government and opposition and among political parties on contested constitutional issues over the course of the constitution-making year, and the Debates that extend over a period of almost four months (December 1972 to April 1973). Because the political accords are in the shape of agreement clauses, and at times aide memoires, the only accessible archival window into the substantive interventions of the women constitution-makers is provided by the Debates, which are in the form of verbatim speeches and dialogue. These have been preserved in their original form, and have been digitised and made open-access by the government in recent years on the official website of the National Assembly of Pakistan.¹⁸

Of the six reserve seats for women in the assembly, three were from different regions of the largest province of Punjab, and one each from the remaining three provinces of Sindh, NWFP and Balochistan. All seats from Punjab and Sindh went to the majority party, Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which also held the reins of government at the centre. The seat from the smallest province (by population) of Balochistan went to the opposition, National Awami Party (NAP). The NWFP seat went to the party with a plurality in the province, Qayyum Muslim League (QML) – an inveterate adversary of NAP and subsequently an ally of PPP. The three PPP women from Punjab included Begum Nasim Jahan from Lahore, Nargis Naim Sindhu from Lyallpur, and Begum Zahida Sultana from Bahawalpur. The fourth PPP member was Dr Ashraf Abbasi from Larkana (Sindh). The women's representative from QML was Shirin Wahab from Peshawar (NWFP), and from the NAP opposition Jennifer Qazi Musa from Pishin (Balochistan).¹⁹

The two outliers among the six women in terms of their participation in the Debates were immediately apparent. Jennifer Qazi Musa from the opposition party of NAP did

¹⁸<https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>.

¹⁹See National Assembly Elections in Pakistan 1970–2008, *Church World Service-Pakistan/Afghanistan and Free and Fair Election Network*, Aug. 2010, 104.

not speak at all during the Debates, even though her principled stance on Balochistan's autonomy in the central legislature *after* the making of the Constitution is well documented. An Irish woman, she was the widow of a Baloch tribal *Sardar*, Qazi Mohammad Musa, brother of the prominent Muslim Leaguer, Qazi Mohammad Isa, who had played an instrumental role in Balochistan's volatile politics in the first decade of Pakistan.²⁰ Musa herself was a founding member of the Balochistan chapter of the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA).²¹ One may speculate that Musa's silence had something to do with the conflict between the government and opposition in the troubled province and the dismissal of the Balochistan provincial government in the midst of constitution-making.²² These complex circumstances may have constrained Musa from speaking during the Debates, even as other members of NAP continued to agitate within and without the assembly. On the other side of the spectrum was Begum Nasim Jahan from PPP, who came out as a most vociferous assembly member and a bold internal critic of her own party. Jahan had a strong political pedigree, being the daughter of the veteran Muslim Leaguer Begum Jehanara Shah Nawaz, one of only two women in Pakistan's first constituent assembly (1947–54).²³ Jahan brought with her a well-founded ideological framework of a 'socialist federation' fortified by 'proletarian' and 'Islamic internationalism'.

Interestingly, Musa and Jahan were the only two women to write dissenting notes to the draft constitution in December 1972 prior to the start of the Debates in their capacity as members of the Constitution Committee, but for very different reasons. Musa was nominated to the Committee at a very late stage upon the voluntary resignation of Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, one of the leading political figures in NAP from Balochistan, causing her to attach a technical note of dissent to the Committee Report on the ground that she had no occasion to participate in the Committee proceedings.²⁴ Begum Jahan, on the other hand, expressed her dissent on a range of issues, including the absence of the term 'socialism' in the draft constitution and the lack of women's representation in the Senate and the Council of Islamic Ideology.²⁵ She also had the distinction of tabling a number of amendments to the draft constitution in her own right, and was probably seen as a dissenter within the majority party.

The remaining four constitution-makers – three from PPP and one from their ally party, QML – fell somewhere in the middle in terms of participating in the Debates. Of these, Dr Ashraf Abbasi from PPP (Sindh) and Shirin Wahab from QML (Peshawar) had a long experience of politics or political activism, while Nargis Naim Sindhu and Begum Zahida Sultana, both from PPP (Punjab), were political newcomers. Dr Abbasi was from a village in Larkana – the ancestral home of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader and founder of PPP – and a medical doctor from Dow Medical College in Karachi. She found

²⁰T. O'Riordan, 'Musa, Jennifer ('Mummy'): Jennifer Jehanzeba Qazi Musa', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, June 2014. <https://www.dib.ie/biography/musa-jennifer-mummy-jennifer-jehanzeba-qazi-musa-a9646>.

²¹See N. A. Shah, 'Role and Contribution of Non-Governmental Organizations in Women Empowerment: A Case Study of the All Pakistan Women's Association', in *Building Sustainable Communities: Civil Society Response in South Asia*, ed. N. Momen et al. (2020), 263.

²²See Presidential Proclamation, Gazette Pakistan, Extraordinary, Part I, 15 Feb. 1973.

²³J. A. Shahnawaz, *Father and Daughter: A Political Autobiography* (Oxford, 2002).

²⁴Note of Dissent by Mrs. Jennifer Jehanzeba Qazi Musa, 31 Dec. 1972, Pakistan, National Assembly of Pakistan, Report of the Constitution Committee Presented to the National Assembly of Pakistan, 28.

²⁵Note of Dissent by Begum Nasim Jahan, Report of the Constitution Committee, 34.

her way into politics on the Bhutto family's persuasion in the early 1960s when Bhutto was a cabinet minister in the Ayub government, and sat on a reserve seat for women in the West Pakistan assembly during the Ayub decade. Thus, Dr Abbasi had long ties to the Bhutto family when she joined the constituent assembly through the PPP ticket in 1972. She also sat on the Constitution Committee from beginning to end. Unlike Dr Abbasi, Shirin Wahab did not previously serve in any assembly, but held the position of the first General Secretary of the Frontier Women's Muslim League (FWML), an organisation set up prior to Partition by the Muslim League for political mobilisation of women in NWFP. Wahab's tilt towards Islamic modernism comes through consistently in the Debates.

The two newcomers, Sindhu and Begum Sultana, were from north and south Punjab, respectively. Sindhu joined PPP after a chance attendance at a political rally held by the party during the election campaign of 1970. She was to become a close confidant of Bhutto and worked her way to a pivotal position in labour politics in the industrial hub of Lyallpur (present-day Faisalabad). Begum Sultana came from a family that had old political connections with the Muslim League and the Nawab of the former princely state of Bahawalpur, but with no personal or proximate experience of politics or social activism. Broadly speaking, Dr Abbasi, Sindhu and Begum Sultana all mirrored and principally defended the ruling party's position on various issues in the assembly, ranging from federalism and provincial autonomy, to the Directive Principles of Policy, to Islamic socialism.

Approaching the Debates from the perspective of learning about the women constitution-makers was not a matter of going along or against the 'archival grain'.²⁶ The Debates are not opaque in the sense of deliberately suppressing or excluding voices, or shaping a dominant narrative. They contain the original bilingual record (English and Urdu)²⁷ of the constituent assembly proceedings. This does not detract from the fact that women as a group have a marginalised voice in the Debates. Given that the six women constituted a very minor sample in a house of 144 members, it was not surprising that they were much less visible than their male counterparts in the assembly. With such a small representation, there was nothing like a women's caucus in the assembly. But even within this informal group, there was much variation in both their political focus and ideological positions, and their vocalness and pushback. This was true even among the four PPP women members who belonged to the majority party and dominated women's space in the assembly. Nonetheless, a collective reading of the women's interventions on the floor of the house suggested that there was value in exploring their contributions to constitution-making as a kind of a tacit coalition on matters pertaining to women. Put another way, women's identity qua women clearly seemed to matter for the inclusion, in the new constitution, of women's rights to political representation.

Thus, there was a strong convergence among the women constitution-makers on the demand for the 'constitutional guarantee of representation' (to borrow Dr Abbasi's words) for women in all constitutional bodies – including the National Assembly, the Senate, the Council of Islamic Ideology, and local government. To begin with, they

²⁶ A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2009).

²⁷ Begum Nasim Jahan and Begum Zahida Sultana spoke in English, while Dr Ashraf Abbasi, Nargis Naim Sindhu and Shirin Wahab spoke in Urdu.

fiercely guarded the proposal of 5 per cent (or 10) reserve seats in the draft constitution as the bare minimum for ensuring women's representation in the National Assembly for the next ten years, even though this figure was clearly too insignificant in their view. Wahab stood out for her intrepid advocacy for 'at least 30 per cent' representation in the Assembly, invoking Quranic verses in support of her demand. During a particularly heated exchange on this issue, Sindhu severely admonished male members who argued for general seats to be reserved for men in reaction to the proposal for women's representation, and reminded the Assembly that a *fatwa* (a non-binding legal ruling from an Islamic religious leader) was the last refuge of the *ulema* (Muslim scholars) whenever women's rights were at stake. Ultimately, the original Constitution of 1973 allocated ten reserve seats to women in the National Assembly through indirect election for a period of ten years or the holding of the second general election to the Assembly, whichever occurred later (Art. 51(4)).

As for the women's demand for representation in the Senate, this was also universal and unequivocal. Dr Abbasi and Begum Sultana were the most vocal proponents of two reserve seats for women from each province in the Senate, while others expressed their hopes for at least one seat from each province. Begum Sultana's reference to the 'glaring omission' in the draft constitution pertaining to women in the Senate was probably the most hard-hitting, given her otherwise eloquent defence of the PPP's proposed structure for a bicameral federal legislature. However, the move for reservation for women's representation in the Senate was thwarted.

With respect to the Council of Islamic Ideology – an advisory body for scrutinising laws for conformity with Islamic injunctions – all women were agreed that the *ulema* must bow to accepting at least one woman on the Council. This demand was conceded, and the Constitution mandated the nomination of one woman to the Council by the President (Art. 228(3)(d)).

The idea of local government (like the Senate) surfaced for the first time in the Constitution. This was a unique proposal from Begum Jahan. It was based on the necessity for a 'grass-root democracy' that would represent 'all class interests', including peasants, workers and women. Its author argued that it would displace the colonial-era bureaucracy, and would allow for the 'socialisation of power' through 'new institutions of mass organisations' at the local level. These would act as 'autonomous units of socio-economic and political power' on the principle of 'all power to the people'. This proposal was welcomed and accepted with only minor changes (Art. 32).²⁸ Most of Begum Jahan's other proposed amendments were derived from her ideological lens of a 'socialist People's Democracy'. These amendments included clauses for equal pay for equal work and the right to work, another for the elimination of 'bureaucratism, despotism, and ostentation', and the substitution of 'egalitarian society' with 'classless society' in the Objectives Resolution. Begum Jahan also endorsed an amendment for making 'Islamic socialism' the basis of Pakistan's economy. However, none of these proposals made their way into the Constitution. Her heterodox idea of giving representation to functional and vocational groups like peasants, workers, students and women in parliament received zero support in the Assembly. She retreated gracefully on the

²⁸The final clause in the original Constitution read thus: '32. The State shall encourage local Government institutions composed of elected representatives of the areas concerned and, in such institutions, special representation shall be given to peasants, workers and women.'

occasion, although she did not otherwise desist from holding PPP to its manifesto and remained an important internal critic of the party.

But while Jahan's was most certainly the dominant voice in the Debates on behalf of women and the working classes, other women constitution-makers did not always see eye-to-eye with her. They differed considerably, for instance, on the method for operationalising the proposed Directive Principle of Policy stipulating that 'steps shall be taken to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of national life'. Begum Jahan had earlier put forward a suggestion in the Constitution Committee for the establishment of a commission on the status of women that had been dismissed on the pretext of lack of resources. During the Debates, she changed her strategy, pushing instead for the insertion of a clause for 'the creation of special women's voluntary organisations with a view to raising the status of women'. This, she professed, was in line with other socialist states. Dr Abbasi was quick to oppose this on the ground that it would restrict the scope of the original Principle and would provide an opening to the government to confine women's participation to such organisations. Sindhu was unpersuaded by Jahan's reliance on 'communist' states like the USSR and China in making this proposal, and argued for foregrounding Pakistan's local context in thinking about modes of women's participation. Wahab added her voice to this from an Islamic modernist perspective, asserting that Islam granted a much broader set of rights to women than any other framework.

However, cases of such disagreement during the Debates were rare, and examples of common cause abundant. Worth highlighting is the joint effort of Dr Abbasi and Begum Jahan to thwart a proposed amendment by Ghulam Ghaus Hazarvi and Mufti Mehmood – both *ulema* belonging to the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI), the party heading the coalition provincial government in NWFP – to 'debar' women from becoming the Head of State. Also crucial was the collective pushback against the *ulema*'s persistent attempts to repeal the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 (MFLO), an important piece of progressive legislation introduced by the Ayub regime to safeguard Muslim women's rights in personal and family matters.²⁹

Reading the women constitution-makers in the Debates gave rise to a strong inference about their collaboration on the demand for political representation for women in the Constitution. Against the backdrop of this inference, the next step in contextualising the life and politics of these women was oral history.

Oral histories

With the Debates as my only point of reference, I embarked on the process of conducting oral histories on the women constitution-makers, a project that is still ongoing. The narrators for these oral histories are close living descendants and friends, and in some cases, colleagues, of these women on their life, times and political careers. The complete erasure of these women from collective memory meant that, unlike other oral histories I am conducting on constitution-making history in parallel to the women's

²⁹L. Carroll, 'The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961: Provisions and Procedures—a Reference Paper for Current Research', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 13 (1979), 117–43.

project, these interviews excavated mostly undocumented information on their protagonists. Thus, the oral histories on the women constitution-makers have enormous potential for shaping the history of the period.

While recognising that oral history is a powerful tool for historical knowledge on gender as a distinct category of analysis, I also became aware of its limitations as I progressed through the initial interviews. The first of these was the fact that, with few exceptions, the oral history narrators seemed to possess very little knowledge of the women's constitution-making politics within the assembly, despite being well-versed with their life histories. Almost all the narrators became aware of these women's speeches and exchanges in the debates for the first time through my project. Some also expressed doubts about their suitability as the primary narrators from the viewpoint of constitution-making, even though they were the closest in kinship to, and unaware of others with living memory of, the subjects. The only exception proved the rule: Dr Ashraf Abbasi's descendant-narrator who was herself a second-generation politician had greater awareness of their subject's contributions to constitution-making because of intergenerational transfer of political knowledge. Another limitation of the oral histories was the person-centredness of the accounts. Because these accounts engaged with life histories as a core element, they tended in many ways to compartmentalise women's political role and representation into individual narratives. Even so, when basic memory aids in the form of references to names and constituencies were provided to the narrators about the other women constitution-makers, most of them alluded to their subject's friendships with one or more of these women, albeit tentatively.

Thus, even as the Debates *prima facie* pointed to some kind of concerted action among the women in demanding political representation, the second-hand oral histories were constrained by gaps and difficulties in recollection. This motivated the adaptation of historical and ethnographic methods like group interviews and reflections to elicit more information about the six women in their role as constitution-makers, as well as explore, and possibly offer a corrective to, the hypothesis about their joint action in enshrining women's right to representation in the new constitution.

Gap-filling in oral history through collective reflection

Purpose and structure

Why the women constitution-makers were squeezed to the margins of political memory provided much food for contemplation. But more importantly, their invisibilisation called for a searching and creative approach to uncovering their lives and political work. The collective reflection was conceived as a way of incubating a method that would create a mnemonic resource for plugging this historical black hole at two levels: first, for recognising these women as constitution-makers, and second, for exploring the possible connections and solidarities among them, within and without the assembly, in the context of shared agendas around a major nation-building project. Thus, the collective reflection was intended to aid memory on both these issues of historical importance using the oral history method as the point of departure, thereby also potentially widening the analytical understanding of these women and their contributions in the process.

The collective comprised a small cohort of oral history narrators on the women constitution-makers as well as archivists whose work engages with material on or related to Pakistan's Constitution. The archivists' role was envisaged mainly as an advisory one for facilitating identification and access to relevant archives on or relating to the women constitution-makers based on the discussion, but also to deepen the discussion where they felt they could aid the memory of the narrators. The core features of the collective reflection were thus group discussion, interface with archival material and the input of archivists. The group discussion was largely unstructured so as to allow for open, interactive and snowballing conversations among six oral history narrators.³⁰ Accordingly, there was a shift away from the dominant position of the oral history interviewer and towards the group of narrators in the co-production of knowledge,³¹ with the caveat that the interviewer/mediator had to intermittently refocus the group discussion on the two issues of the women's role as constitution-makers and the solidarity among them in the process of constitution-making. At the same time, the group of narrators was situated in conversation with the Debates through a presentation of excerpted speeches by the women in the constituent assembly. Since constitution-making was an indirectly experienced event for the narrators, this reference to external sources was designed as a cue for evoking memories of family storytelling around the role of the women in the assembly. The narrators were also free to draw from other sources outside of their direct experience, so that the entire emphasis of the collective reflection was not limited to direct recollection. Finally, two archivists – one from the Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), the official and only broadcasting service in the early 1970s,³² and the other from the Oral History Project at the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP)³³ – were included in the discussion to share insights on possible intersections between the collective reflection and the broader universe of archives on constitution-making.

The main purpose of the collective reflection diverged from the key focus of contemporary memory studies on analysing or theorising the construction and function of memory in oral history.³⁴ It had a much more modest aim of enabling the production of knowledge, however flawed or fragmented, on a historical subject on which there was very little by way of a prevailing dominant account or metanarrative. The combined reliance on memory and archival exploration was a corollary to this. Neither did the collective reflection seek to engage with the big debate on the impact of 'collective memory' on shaping history, the central premise of which is the idea that the

³⁰These included: Ashraf Jehangir Qazi and Mueen Afzal on behalf of Jennifer Qazi Musa; Dr. Safdar Ali Abbasi on behalf of Dr. Ashraf Abbasi; Hafeez Ghaznavi on behalf of both Nargis Naim Sindhu and Begum Zahida Sultana; Kunwar Qutbuddin on behalf of Shirin Wahab; and Javaid Siddiqui on behalf of both Nargis Naim Sindhu and Dr. Ashraf Abbasi. Regrettably, some of the oral history narrators were unable to attend the collective reflection, because of which Begum Nasim Jahan could not be represented at this forum.

³¹B. Coupland, 'Remembering Blaenavon: What Can Group Interviews Tell Us about "Collective Memory"?', *The Oral History Review*, 42 (2015), 277–99, at 282.

³²Safdar Gardezi.

³³Fareeha Hashmi.

³⁴A. Thomson, M. Frisch and P. Hamilton, 'The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives', *Oral History*, 22.2 (1994), 33–43; A. Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *The Oral History Review*, 34.1 (2006), 49–70.

subjective voices of individuals belonging to a social group are subsumed into collective scripts of social reality.³⁵ In contrast to this – and in line with what critics of the collective memory premise perceive as the unjustified devaluing of individual agency in oral history³⁶ – the collective reflection did not *a priori* seek to diminish the importance of individual recollection. Instead, it attempted to transcend the limitations of the individual lens by situating it within an iterative space between subjective memory and ‘an audience of peers’.³⁷ In so doing, to the extent that the relationship between individual and collective memory was relevant or consequential, and to the extent that there were tensions in the remembered narratives, the collective reflection left these questions open to observation and analysis. Moreover, given that the women constitution-makers project is based on second-hand accounts, the problem of group identity – how it constitutes memory and conditions the interpretation of history – was not the core concern of the collective reflection. While the reflection cohered around a historical event, its interlocutors did not belong to any particular social or political group, nor was there any evidence to suggest that their individual memories were constructed at the level of the group. Indeed, the hypothesis that the interaction among the women constitution-makers, personal and political, was constitutive of or formed the backdrop to their constitutional role was necessitated precisely by the lack of any apparent linkages of group identity among the women, with the exception of common political party association for some of them.

Insights and limitations

The expansion of the oral history method through a collective reflection was in many respects helpful in advancing the twofold purpose of the women constitution-makers project to co-produce knowledge on these women, and to generate a rich synthetic picture of their political role and interventions in the constitution-making process. However, the collective reflection was inconclusive in verifying the hypothesis drawn from the Debates about the collective action of the six women in advocating on behalf of women’s political representation in the Constitution. I evaluate the reasons for this in the analysis of the outcomes of the collective reflection below.

The format of the group discussion and its interface with the archival material from the Debates was overall very productive in facilitating mutual reinforcement among the narrators on the identity of the women in the constituent assembly of 1972–3 as *constitution-makers*. They all endorsed the women constitution-makers project as pivotal in reshaping the history of the Constitution. Moreover, a couple of narrators unexpectedly suggested new references for oral histories in relation to women on whose behalf they were not otherwise speaking. This would perhaps not have transpired within an individual oral history setting, and was plausibly a consequence of

³⁵A. Green, ‘Individual Remembering and “Collective Memory”: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates’, *Oral History*, 32.2 (2004), 35–44.

³⁶Coupland, ‘Remembering Blaenavon’; Graham Smith, ‘Beyond Individual/Collective Memory: Women’s Transactive Memories of Food, Family and Conflict’, *Oral History*, 35.2 (2007), 77–90.

³⁷O. Rantatalo and S. Karp, ‘Collective Reflection in Practice: An Ethnographic Study of Swedish Police Training’, *Reflective Practice*, 17 (2016), 708–23, at 718. The authors refer to this kind of reflective practice as ‘specular reflection’ (*ibid.*).

positioning the narrators in conversation with each other. Largely unfamiliar with the contents of the Debates, some of the narrators also relied, from memory, on newspaper archives relating to the women. One prominent example was a reference to a newspaper article in a leading local English daily reporting the indirect election contest in the assembly for deputy speaker. Both the government and opposition proposed women members for this position – Dr Ashraf Abbasi and Jennifer Qazi Musa, respectively. While Dr Abbasi as the ruling party's representative won by a big margin, as expected, the remembrance brought into sharp relief the value both parties placed on their women members. It also highlighted a brief but positive interaction of two protagonists on the floor of the house on this significant occasion.³⁸

On the theme of women's solidarity on the question of representation, the group discussion offered a number of interesting insights about the relationships among the women, with the caveat that these recollections painted a picture almost exclusively of social interactions and personal friendships outside the assembly, saying nothing in particular of political collaboration on constitution-making. The first thing to note is that political party association did not seem to be an important, even relevant, factor in the personal relations among the women. In other words, there was nothing to show that there was any kind of in-group association of the four PPP members. The only close relation within PPP's party fold was between Nargis Naim Sindhu and Begum Zahida Sultana. Both had overlapped in Lyallpur for a short time, and it is probably during this period that their friendship grew. All the other friendships described by the narrators were across party lines. For instance, between Jennifer Musa (NAP) and Begum Jahan (PPP), between Jennifer Musa (NAP) and Shirin Wahab (QML), and between Dr Abbasi (PPP) and Shirin Wahab (QML). Some of these friendships existed despite strained relations between the government and the opposition. Thus, on the one hand, members from the majority party did not appear to be well-knit at a social level; on the other, cross-party relations between some of the members was an indication that a broader coalition among the women within the assembly was a real possibility.

However, because the narrators could not speak to any strategic alignments inside the assembly, the personal friendships of these women alone could not reveal the full breadth of the political solidarity between them. Even in the absence of competing memories within the group of narrators, it was difficult to assess the scope of the missing information. In the final analysis, the collective reflection could not clarify whether the concerted action apparent in the Debates was coincidental, spontaneous or pre-constituted in some way, but this ambivalence had more to do with the dearth of oral history narrators on the subject of the assembly-based interaction of the women constitution-makers than the structure of the conversation in the reflection.

Compounding this gap in knowledge was the alarming input from one of the archivists with access to the official audio-visual archives relating to constitution-making: that some of these crucial archives had been deliberately destroyed by the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq that brought to an end Pakistan's brief

³⁸From the Past Pages of Dawn: 1973: 50 Years Ago: Woman Deputy Speaker, 12 Aug. 1973, Pakistan, Dawn, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1769654>.

democratic experiment through a coup in 1977. As a hopeful counterpoint to this was the suggestion from the second of the two archivists participating in the collective reflection who coordinates the CAP's oral history project: that the potentialities of the oral history method should not be underestimated, and that focused dialogues between narrators of women constitution-makers who were ostensibly friends may yet allow us to glean more insights in the quest for a gender-conscious history of constitution-making in Pakistan.

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