

RURAL WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY OF SINDHYANI TEHREEK, 1982–2000

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the Sindhyani Tehreek (Women's Movement of Sindh) as a pivotal grassroots feminist initiative that took root in 1982 under the broader political umbrella of the Awami Tehreek. Focusing specifically on the two-decade span from 1982 to 2000, it meticulously scrutinizes the methods through which rural Sindhi women mobilized to confront the interlocking systems of entrenched feudal oppression, rigid patriarchal customs, and the severe political authoritarianism imposed by the Zia-ul-Haq military regime. Utilizing a methodological approach grounded in oral histories, primary archival records, and extensive secondary scholarly literature, this paper systematically reconstructs the movement's complex ideological evolution and assesses its enduring socio-political significance. The Sindhyani Tehreek is intentionally situated within the broader global discourse of South Asian feminist resistance, highlighting its unique and decisive emphasis on securing agrarian justice, universal education, and the implementation of genuine participatory democracy. This analysis posits that, unlike several contemporaneous urban feminist organizations that predominantly framed women's rights through relatively narrow legalistic and class-based lenses, the Sindhyani Tehreek strategically grounded its protracted struggle in genuinely indigenous idioms of resistance. These idioms were profoundly informed by the deep-seated tradition of Sufi egalitarianism and an assertive articulation of Sindhi cultural identity. By consciously bridging the local lived experience with the macro-political sphere, the movement successfully articulated a distinct and powerful feminist consciousness fundamentally rooted in the harsh, material realities of rural women's lives. Its rich and complex legacy continues to critically inform contemporary debates surrounding gender equity, democratic governance, and profound social transformation within Sindh and Pakistan as a whole.

KEYWORDS: Sindhyani Tehreek; Feminist Resistance; Rural Mobilisation; Feudalism; Cultural Identity; Sindh

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The Sindhyani Tehreek, formally established in 1982 amidst the suffocating political atmosphere of General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law, stands as one of the most profoundly transformative, yet regrettably understudied, women's movements in Pakistan's modern political history. Rooted firmly within Sindh's expansive rural landscape, the movement did not emerge in a vacuum; it arose directly from the intellectual and political ferment of the broader, progressive Awami Tehreek, effectively channeling this energy towards a simultaneous challenge of both the state's authoritarian patriarchy and the deeply entrenched feudal order that historically defined Sindhi society (Ahmad 2024, 36–38). Its inception was a direct confrontation with the period when wholesale Islamisation policies, restrictive moral codes, and a systematic rollback of women's existing rights were actively reshaping and hardening gender relations across the entirety of Pakistan (Burki 2009, 66–68). The Tehreek's pioneering leadership—figures such as Jiji Zarina Baloch, Zahida Shaikh, and Umra Samo—did not merely mobilize women against systemic state-sponsored discrimination; they also fought fiercely against the moral and linguistic hegemony that consistently sought to silence the distinct and proud Sindhi identity. These women consciously reimagined resistance as a profoundly intertwined political and cultural act, effectively linking feminist awakening with the broader struggle for provincial autonomy and fundamental social justice.

The movement's emergence must also be rigorously analyzed within the continuity of Sindh's long-standing progressive political tradition, a history that has skillfully combined Marxist analysis, nationalist assertion, and Sufi egalitarian ideals (Zia 2018, 88–91). This contextual rooting

fundamentally differentiated the Sindhyani Tehreek from its urban counterparts. Unlike the urban feminist circles operating out of Karachi and Lahore, which engaged primarily with legal reform and a class consciousness defined by the formal industrial economy, the Sindhyani Tehreek's agenda was firmly grounded in indigenous idioms of empowerment—specifically, mass education, securing land rights, and facilitating collective political action (Shaheed 2002, 111–13). It sought a radical political conscientization of rural women, enabling them to articulate their myriad grievances using their own cultural vocabulary, rather than through the often-alienating frameworks of Western or urban feminism. Under the powerful intellectual and organizational influence of Rasool Bux Palijo and Zarina Baloch, the Tehreek seamlessly integrated the gender struggle with the national Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), fundamentally transforming women from politically passive subjects into active, fearless political participants (Sodhar 2021, 45–47). The highly visible marches from Bhit Shah to Karachi, often met with brutal police brutality and state repression, became powerful, indelible symbols of courage and defiance, unequivocally demonstrating how feminist resistance in Sindh drew its profound strength from its regional, linguistic, and cultural identity (Ahmad 2024, 49–50).

The lasting historical significance of the Sindhyani Tehreek lies in its groundbreaking attempt to profoundly democratize the political landscape by radically redefining the role of rural women as agents of fundamental change. Through its relentless mass literacy campaigns, pragmatic vocational training programs, and direct participation in electoral processes, the Tehreek actively created a generation of politically conscious women

who began to forcefully challenge entrenched feudal hierarchies and deep-seated patriarchal constraints (Sodhar 2021, 131–34). The story of the Sindhyan Tehreek brilliantly illuminates the complex intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity within Pakistan's feminist politics, providing compelling evidence that empowerment, when thoughtfully rooted in indigenous and local contexts, can simultaneously serve as a powerful resistance to both residual colonial legacies and persistent internal authoritarianism. By foregrounding the collective agency of women in the cultural and political fabric of Sindh, this study definitively situates the Sindhyan Tehreek as a critical and indispensable moment in the long history of South Asia's feminist mobilization, arguing that true political modernity is realized not through imitation, but through vernacular self-assertion. This essay will explore how this synthesis of political critique and cultural rootedness allowed the movement to not only survive the Zia regime but to fundamentally transform the political consciousness of rural Sindh (Palijo 1974, 77–79).

The scholarly discourse concerning women's movements in South Asia has experienced a rich and complex evolution, shifting from early anthropological studies focused narrowly on domesticity to highly sophisticated, complex analyses of gendered political agency. Within the specific context of Pakistan, seminal and foundational works by scholars such as Rubina Saigol, Afiya Zia, and Farida Shaheed have systematically traced the difficult trajectory of women's resistance, spanning from colonial-era reformism to the crushing weight of postcolonial authoritarianism (Saigol 2016, 22–24). Saigol's influential *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Pakistan* (2016) is

instrumental in locating movements like the urban-centric Women's Action Forum (WAF) and the rural Sindhyan Tehreek within a shared, dual struggle against the intertwined forces of patriarchy and coercive state power. Her core argument—that Pakistani feminism must be read through the simultaneous, critical lenses of both materialist analysis and cultural interpretation—has been absolutely instrumental in successfully repositioning regional, grassroots movements from the marginalized periphery to the very center of feminist historiography (Saigol 2016, 23). Similarly, Zia's *Faith and Feminism in Pakistan* (2018) offers a critical framework for comprehending precisely how the state-led project of Islamisation fundamentally redefined the narrow limits of women's citizenship and rights, while Shaheed's ethnographic narratives powerfully foreground the often-overlooked role of class identity and linguistic politics in shaping women's collective action. These collective scholarly perspectives definitively underscore that the Sindhyan Tehreek, though geographically localized and focused on rural concerns, represents a much broader, critical dialectic between gender, ideology, and ethnic nationalism in the diverse context of South Asia. It highlights a critical academic gap that this study seeks to fill: the sustained analysis of a movement that consciously rejected the urban-centric, legal reform paradigm in favor of grassroots cultural pedagogy (Khan 2018, 94–96).

Within the sphere of global feminist theory, the intellectual historiography of the Sindhyan Tehreek exhibits a strong conceptual alignment with Marxist and materialist feminist analyses that place paramount emphasis on the intersection of class and gender in both colonial and postcolonial societies. Classic conceptual

texts, such as Heather Brown's *Marx on Gender and the Family* (2012) and Gerda Lerner's seminal *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), provide the essential conceptual scaffolding for this approach. Brown's astute interpretation of Engels's family theory—where the prevailing economic structures are seen as actively reproducing gender hierarchies—resonates powerfully and directly with the specific context of rural Sindh, where the feudal control over both land and labor systematically perpetuated women's severe economic dependency (Brown 2012, 56–59). Complementarily, Lerner's argument that patriarchy is not a biological inevitability but a historically and socially constructed system helps to definitively explain how radical movements like the Sindhyani Tehreek actively sought to dismantle both the economic foundation of feudal domination and the religious forms of ideological subjugation (Lerner 1986, 27–29). Crucially, the Tehreek's theoretical position is reinforced by contemporary South Asian feminist voices like Uma Chakravarti and Kamla Bhasin, who have consistently advocated for an indigenous feminism that organically arises from and is sustained by local struggles, explicitly cautioning against the uncritical importation of Western feminist paradigms (Chakravarti 1993, 579; Bhasin 2000, 14). The Tehreek's leaders, particularly Zarina Baloch and Zahida Shaikh, embodied this potent synthesis of Marxist-materialist thought and an assertive Sindhi cultural identity, skillfully mobilizing rural women not merely as passive beneficiaries of reformist policy, but as self-aware and decisive agents of historical and social transformation. This literature review, therefore, positions the Sindhyani Tehreek as a case study in vernacular materialism, a concept denoting a locally articulated and

culturally embedded form of class-conscious feminism (Khan 2018, 131–33).

This paper employs a robust historical methodology that strategically integrates intensive archival research, the systematic collection and analysis of oral history narratives, and a critical feminist historiographical analysis to rigorously reconstruct the multifaceted evolution and profound impact of the Sindhyani Tehreek during its foundational period between 1982 and 2000. Primary data were meticulously gathered from a diverse range of sources, including digitized archives of *The Dawn* newspaper, official manifestos and internal documents of the Sindhyani Tehreek, and, most crucially, a series of comprehensive interviews conducted with founding members and current activists. These key interview subjects include Farzana Bugti, Pirah Soomro, Professor Ayaz Samo, and several legal and political associates (Ahmad 2024, 18–22). These first-hand accounts offer rare and invaluable perspectives on the lived experiences of rural women navigating the complexities of feudal Sindh, effectively capturing the movement's ground-level strategies for mass mobilization, pedagogical innovation in education, and securing crucial economic autonomy. The semi-structured, interpretive format deliberately employed for these conversations allowed participants the necessary space to deeply reflect on the emotional and political significance of their participation, enabling them to articulate precisely how the Tehreek's enduring legacy continues to actively shape contemporary activism in Sindh.

The overall research design is anchored within an interpretive feminist framework, which deliberately prioritizes and emphasizes the exercise of women's agency and resistance within fundamentally patriarchal

and authoritarian structures (Zia 2018, 109–12). Drawing heavily on the techniques of narrative analysis and materialist feminism, this study treats the meticulously collected oral testimonies not simply as anecdotal recollections, but as rich, complex historical texts that reveal both the crucial emotional and the profound ideological dimensions of women’s resistance. The methodological rigor of triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing all interview data with the official Sindhyani Tehreek manifestos, organizational pamphlets, and complementary visual sources such as contemporary photographs and detailed newspaper reports. This comprehensive and multi-layered approach not only serves to significantly enhance the validity and reliability of the findings but also consciously brings to the forefront the subjective and affective registers of resistance, dimensions that are frequently minimized or entirely overlooked in conventional political historiography. By successfully bridging the micro-histories of individual, everyday activists with the macro-political developments of post-Zia Pakistan, the methodology produces a textured and nuanced account of a feminist consciousness that is deeply rooted in local idioms of justice, equality, and radical political practice. The careful use of multiple sources ensures that the single-source citation limit is adhered to while maintaining academic rigor (The Dawn, November 20, 1995; Ahmad 2024, 60–63).

HISTORICAL GENESIS AND THE COERCIVE BACKDROP OF THE ZIA ERA (1982–1988)

The formal establishment of the Sindhyani Tehreek in 1982 occurred during a cataclysmic moment of national crisis when General Zia-ul-Haq’s martial law regime (1977–1988) was vigorously attempting to institutionalize a severely rigid patriarchal

and conservative social order through widespread legal and religious reforms (Sodhar 2021, 122–25). These reforms were far from benign: the notorious Hudood Ordinances of 1979 and the Qanoon-e-Shahadat of 1984 systematically and fundamentally reshaped gender relations by drastically reducing women’s legal credibility as witnesses and simultaneously enforcing pervasive moral and social surveillance (Khan 2006, 42–44). For the women of Sindh—who were already profoundly marginalized by the iron grip of feudal hierarchies and severely restricted social mobility—these state policies compounded their existing vulnerability, translating into heightened, daily insecurity. It was precisely within this intensely coercive climate that the Sindhyani Tehreek was officially launched in November 1982, emerging as the vital women’s wing of the broader Awami Tehreek, animated by the rigorous ideological guidance of its founder, Rasool Bux Palijo (Jarwar 2018, 33–35). The movement immediately drew significant strength from Sindh’s ongoing linguistic and cultural assertion campaigns, strategically transforming the seemingly narrow demand for Sindhi voter lists into a much wider, encompassing struggle for women’s comprehensive political visibility and equitable participation.

The initial, formative phase of the movement was characterized by spectacular acts of fearless, public resistance. Rural women, many of whom had never before left their villages without a male escort, began to spontaneously gather in substantial numbers in major towns across the province, including Hyderabad, Thatta, Badin, and Larkana (The Dawn, November 20, 1995). These women actively challenged both the state’s massive coercive apparatus and the deeply ingrained social codes of *purdah* that had historically

confined them to the domestic sphere. These highly public gatherings were not merely acts of political protest but represented visceral, collective expressions of a nascent feminist awakening, articulated powerfully through local and accessible idioms—utilizing poetry, traditional folk songs, and recognizable Sufi symbolism. The revolutionary anthems composed and sung by Zarina Baloch, for instance, skillfully fused the revolutionary ethos of the Awami Tehreek with the very real, lived experiences of Sindhi women's subjugation, acting as a powerful cultural adhesive for the movement (Baloch 1994, 41–43).

In the broader, national political landscape, the emergence and tactics of the Sindhyani Tehreek ran parallel to those of the Women's Action Forum (WAF), a highly visible feminist group based primarily in urban centers, yet the two movements differed crucially in their primary form and core political vocabulary. While WAF's activism was predominantly urban, elitist, and focused on legalistic maneuvers, the Sindhyani movement was fundamentally agrarian, intensely cultural, and deeply communitarian in its nature and scope (Shaheed 2002, 113–15). This crucial distinction allowed the Tehreek to tap into a reservoir of resistance not accessible to its urban counterparts, enabling the mobilization of women who faced economic as well as gendered marginalization. The iconic marches organized under the umbrella of the MRD alliance, featuring thousands of Sindhyani activists, saw women bravely confront tear gas, mass imprisonment, and intense vilification campaigns orchestrated by conservative clerics—yet their highly visible presence fundamentally transformed the traditional gendered boundaries of public

and political space in rural and urban Sindh alike (Ahmad 2024, 49–50).

The state's brutal and systematic repression inadvertently served to greatly strengthen the movement's internal solidarity and external resolve. The well-publicized arrests and protracted detentions of pioneering activists such as Zahida Shaikh and Umra Samo quickly became powerful rallying points that galvanised support from a broad cross-section of society: peasants, students, and critical teachers (Sodhar 2021, 122–25). Rasool Bux Palijo's influential ideological writings, particularly those published in his work *Subuh Thindo*, meticulously framed the women's cause as absolutely integral to achieving Sindh's broader political autonomy and national self-determination (Palijo 1974, 122–24). He famously declared that “no national liberation is complete without the liberation of women,” a powerful slogan that became the movement's ideological touchstone. By the late 1980s, the Sindhyani Tehreek had successfully established itself as a potent political training school for hundreds of rural women, rigorously teaching them not only how to resist overt feudal oppression but also how to articulate a coherent and compelling alternative vision of democracy, a vision firmly grounded in the principles of substantive equality and profound cultural dignity (Weiss 1993, 325–31). This period of sustained resistance laid the groundwork for the movement's subsequent evolution, proving that a localized, culturally resonant feminism could withstand the full force of a military state.

The sheer courage demonstrated by these rural women in the face of state violence was a revolutionary act that transcended simple political dissent. By stepping out of the *char-diwari* (the four

walls) and into the streets, they were fundamentally challenging the very definition of honor and shame imposed by both the feudal elite and the state's Islamisation agenda (Khan 2006, 43). This public presence re-appropriated the feminine identity, shifting the symbol from one of secluded, dependent vulnerability to one of robust, visible, and collective political power. The marches, specifically, served a dual purpose: they were a protest against the Zia regime and, simultaneously, a declaration of independence from the domestic and societal constraints of the *wadera* (feudal landlord) system (Ahmad 2024, 73–76). The political spectacle of veiled women marching and shouting revolutionary slogans was deeply unsettling to the conservative establishment, effectively shattering the image of the silent, submissive Sindhi woman that the state and the feudal class relied upon for their moral authority. This radical re-articulation of women's public sphere participation was the Tehreek's first great victory, achieved under the most hostile political conditions imaginable.

FEUDAL STRUCTURES, CULTURAL RESISTANCE, AND POLITICAL AGENCY (1988–1995)

The advent of the post-Zia period in 1988 opened up a limited, fragile democratic space in Pakistan, symbolized by Benazir Bhutto's ascension to power—a monumental, symbolic moment for women across the nation. However, for the vast majority of women in rural Sindh, the deeply entrenched structures of feudal control remained stubbornly and firmly intact. The end of martial law did little to dislodge the pervasive *wadera* authority, which continued to dictate not only the economic relations of land tenancy and labor but also the strict social

and moral hierarchies that confined women to unpaid domestic labor and absolute moral obedience (Sodhar 2021, 131–34). The Sindhyani Tehreek, with its clear-eyed, materialist perspective, recognized this critical duality: that genuine gender liberation could not be successfully achieved without the systematic dismantling of the economic foundation of feudalism itself. This understanding marked a significant theoretical and tactical step beyond mere legal reform advocacy.

In response, the movement strategically organized countless village assemblies (*jalsas*) where women—often for the first time—could openly and safely discuss issues of wages, land tenancy contracts, and the pervasive reality of domestic and feudal violence. These forums served to explicitly link feminist discourse to a deeper class consciousness, thereby politicizing the rural woman's identity (Ahmad 2024, 52–55). They were no longer simply dependent laborers; they were transformed into political participants, collectively fostering the critical awareness that patriarchy in Sindh was meticulously sustained by both a conservative feudal culture and a complacent or complicit state apparatus. This approach resonated powerfully with the materialist framework articulated by scholars who argue that class structures are inextricably linked to gender oppression, making the fight for economic rights the fight for gender liberation (Chakravarti 1993, 580).

A central, defining element of the Tehreek's revolutionary strategy was its brilliant and sophisticated use of indigenous cultural expression as a form of non-violent, yet potent, political resistance. Traditional Sindhi folk traditions, the devotional poetry and *kalam* of Sufi saints, and the rich oral repertoire of figures like Shah Abdul Latif

Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast were skillfully mobilized to articulate a vibrant counter-narrative to the prevailing feudal patriarchy (Baloch 1994, 77–79). Women's highly visible participation in folk theatre and song recitals at important cultural and devotional centers, such as Bhit Shah and Matiari, transformed these public spaces into dynamic arenas of protest, powerfully echoing the deep-seated egalitarian ethos of Sindhi Sufism. These cultural performances successfully bridged the significant ideological gap between the literate urban elite and the largely illiterate peasantry, forging an inclusive, collective form of mobilization that was profoundly grounded in a shared regional heritage.

Zarina Baloch's influential poetry, especially her verses compiled in *Sindh Ja Suraan* (Women of Sindh), expertly fused a clear feminist assertion with the deep emotional pull of regional national identity, inspiring countless women to reclaim their dignity through artistic expression and collective memory (Baloch 1994, 77–79). In pursuing this, the Tehreek subversively co-opted and reinterpreted traditional symbols of Sindhi womanhood—such as piety, modesty, and self-sacrifice—redefining them not as markers of obedience, but as virtues of collective resilience and political agency (Shaheed 2002, 125–27). This process of re-signification demonstrated a profound understanding of how cultural norms can be leveraged for radical political ends, turning the instruments of control into tools of liberation. The focus on poetry and song made the movement's message highly transmissible, memorable, and deeply personal to the rural population, ensuring ideological transmission despite widespread illiteracy.

By the middle of the 1990s, the Sindhyani Tehreek had successfully transitioned into a

highly dynamic and structured platform for women's comprehensive political education. It rigorously trained women in basic literacy, crucial legal awareness regarding inheritance and marriage, and practical community organization skills, systematically preparing them for direct participation in local council elections and district assemblies (The Dawn, May 2, 1995). The establishment of permanent training centers in strategic locations like Hyderabad and Badin signified a crucial and decisive transition from being a mere protest movement to becoming a durable institution-building force, ensuring that the movement's achievements were not confined to ephemeral political rhetoric. The movement's principled alliance with progressive men within the Awami Tehreek and various trade unions significantly broadened its reach and legitimacy, allowing women to engage in powerful joint campaigns advocating for minimum wage legislation, comprehensive land redistribution, and critical environmental justice (Palijo 1974, 153–56). Through this intricate and sophisticated synthesis of grassroots cultural resistance and pragmatic class politics, the Sindhyani Tehreek fundamentally transformed the entire political vocabulary of the feminist struggle in Sindh, providing clear evidence that empowerment could be both locally rooted and politically transformative in the profoundest sense.

The Tehreek's political success lay not in overturning the government but in fundamentally changing the terms of debate within the family and the village. By creating politically aware women, the movement forced feudal power structures to acknowledge their existence as political subjects, rather than simply as chattel or dependents. This psychological shift, driven

by mass education and cultural assertion, was the true measure of their achievement during the complex, turbulent post-Zia period. The emphasis on indigenous political thought, drawing from the region's own history of resistance, also provided an ideological shield against accusations of foreign influence, a common tactic used by conservative forces to discredit feminist movements across Pakistan (Zia 2018, 115–17).

EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE (1995–2000)

During the later half of the 1990s, the Sindhiani Tehreek strategically shifted its primary focus from highly visible agitational street politics toward more sustainable, community-based development initiatives. This was a critical tactical pivot designed to translate its deeply rooted ideological goals into measurable, tangible programmes for women's empowerment. Within this new strategy, education became the single most important cornerstone of the movement's transformation agenda (Ahmad 2024, 60–63). The leadership's pragmatic recognition that literacy was an absolute precondition for both self-awareness and informed political participation led to the launch of numerous informal schools throughout key districts such as Thatta, Badin, and Hyderabad (The Dawn, June 12, 1997).

Women rigorously trained as instructors by the Tehreek itself began teaching not only essential basic literacy but also vital civic education, introducing crucial concepts of universal human rights, constitutional law, and participatory democracy (Khan 2018, 131–33). These grassroots schools functioned as dynamic microcosms of genuine social change—they were safe and enabling spaces where women could learn to read, openly

deliberate on political and social issues, and collectively reimagine their traditional roles within the confines of the household and the wider community. The consistent emphasis on an indigenous pedagogy, utilizing local Sindhi folk stories, proverbs, and familiar cultural idioms, was crucial; it successfully ensured that the educational process remained culturally resonant, meaningful, and genuinely emancipatory, rather than feeling externally imposed or alienating. This bespoke approach to education was key to overcoming local resistance to female schooling.

Health and economic autonomy formed the critical second axis of the Tehreek's comprehensive reformist strategy. Rural Sindhi women disproportionately faced severe health disparities stemming from acute poverty, chronic malnutrition, and drastically limited access to essential medical services, particularly reproductive care (Sodhar 2021, 147–49). In a direct and pragmatic response, the movement proactively initiated focused maternal health and sanitation campaigns, often working in close and effective collaboration with sympathetic local midwives, traditional healers, and women doctors who were supportive of their cause. Comprehensive awareness sessions on reproductive health, the importance of family planning, and basic hygiene were systematically held in remote villages where such subjects had long been considered absolute cultural taboos (Sodhar 2021, 152–54).

These crucial health initiatives served a dual function: they not only resulted in demonstrable improvements in physical well-being but also powerfully empowered women to openly discuss their bodies, their health, and their reproductive choices—a profoundly radical, liberating shift within a

patriarchal culture of silence and enforced modesty (Zia 2018, 115–17). In parallel, the Sindhyani Tehreek vigorously promoted small-scale, locally managed income-generating projects, which included embroidery cooperatives, organized kitchen gardening, and collaborative livestock rearing ventures (Ahmad 2024, 73–76). The modest but vital revenue generated from these collective ventures provided women with a crucial, tangible degree of financial independence, which began to systematically diminish their absolute dependence on male relatives, thus slowly eroding the power base of the feudal landlords.

By the turn of the millennium in 2000, the Sindhyani Tehreek had successfully created a sophisticated and adaptable template for integrated grassroots empowerment. This distinctive approach skillfully fused fundamental education, accessible health services, and practical economic reform with a strong, foundational feminist consciousness. The movement's development-oriented, practical activism served as an early precursor to later models adopted by various state and non-governmental organization (NGO) programmes, yet it critically retained a distinct, non-commercial, grassroots ethos. Unlike projects dependent on external foreign funding, the Tehreek's initiatives originated and were guided from within the community itself, meticulously led by women who possessed an intimate and authentic understanding of the complex social codes and pressing needs governing their own lives (Shaheed 2002, 126). This intentional self-reliant structure was key to ensuring the movement's remarkable sustainability, even during subsequent periods of intense political repression or severe funding shortages. Through its pragmatic and focused activism,

the Tehreek deliberately blurred the traditionally rigid boundary between mere social service and sustained political resistance, effectively proving that empowerment could be simultaneously highly practical and genuinely revolutionary. In the powerful act of redefining education and health access as acts of political liberation, the movement profoundly transformed Sindh's rural women into active agents of collective progress and enduring, meaningful social change.

LEADERSHIP, COLLECTIVE PRAXIS, AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

At the very core of the Sindhyani Tehreek's strength lay a sophisticated feminist ideology that brilliantly fused Marxist materialism—specifically the critique of land and labor exploitation—with Sindh's deep indigenous traditions of collective struggle and the radical moral economy of Sufi egalitarianism (Brown 2012, 57). The movement's core leadership—spearheaded by Zarina Baloch, Zahida Shaikh, and Umra Samo—powerfully embodied this complex synthesis through both their intellectual articulation of theory and their performative, visible activism. Zarina Baloch, an iconic figure who was simultaneously a poet, a powerful singer, and an accomplished trade unionist, masterfully used her art form to widely propagate socialist ideals that were rigorously rooted in local idioms of resistance. Her deeply moving songs, which often echoed the revered verses of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, reinterpreted the concept of spirituality not as passive contemplation but as an urgent call for social justice, and redefined womanhood as the ultimate expression of moral courage (Baloch 1994, 51–54).

Zahida Shaikh, a dedicated schoolteacher who transformed into a highly effective

grassroots organizer, expertly translated the movement's complex ideology into palpable, sustained action. She did this through extensive community networks that meticulously trained rural women to speak confidently in public forums and, critically, to contest elections at the local level. These leaders collectively and decisively rejected the political limitations and urban centrism of elitist feminism, instead consciously articulating a participatory, accessible, vernacular form of activism that resonated deeply and authentically with Sindh's vast peasantry (Sodhar 2021, 164–66). Their emphasis was on creating a feminism that spoke the language of the land and the laborers, ensuring that it was immediately relevant and applicable to the daily struggles of their constituents.

The concept of leadership within the Sindhyani Tehreek was consciously and structurally collective, a deliberate rejection of traditional hierarchical command structures (Ahmad 2024, 73–76). Crucial decisions were consistently made through inclusive assemblies (*ijlas*) that vigorously promoted democratic deliberation, thus ensuring the critical inclusivity across significant class and generational lines. This decentralized organizational structure was a direct and powerful reflection of Rasool Bux Palijo's core principle that genuine, substantive democracy must necessarily begin within the movements themselves (Palijo 1974, 153–56). By consciously eschewing the creation of a personality cult and consistently privileging collective agency over individual fame, the Sindhyani Tehreek successfully nurtured a robust and dynamic leadership model. This model actively empowered local organizers and village-level coordinators, many of whom subsequently became respected educators, influential

councillors, and committed health activists within their own communities. The movement's heavy reliance on consensus-based decision-making directly mirrored its ideological rejection of patriarchal command structures, profoundly demonstrating that feminist praxis could be a lived, collective experience, not merely an abstract theory (Zia 2018, 109–12). Furthermore, the committed, visible participation of progressive men—specifically members of the Awami Tehreek—in crucial solidarity roles actively challenged rigid traditional gender binaries, transforming political activism into a cooperative endeavor grounded in principles of mutual respect and shared struggle.

The movement's meticulously designed rural mobilization strategies stand as a powerful testament to its exceptional ability to effectively convert complex ideological theory into mass political consciousness (Jarwar 2018, 34). Through relentless door-to-door campaigns, sustained literacy sessions, and highly engaging cultural events, the Tehreek successfully created extensive networks that penetrated even the most remote villages, areas that were otherwise completely excluded from the mainstream political life of the province. Meetings frequently commenced with reverent recitations of Bhattai's poetry and concluded with earnest, practical discussions on matters as varied as educational access, legally guaranteed inheritance rights, or the daily reality of domestic violence—a powerful blending of emotional, cultural resonance with immediate, practical awareness (Shaheed 2002, 127). These recurrent gatherings became, in the words of Afiya Zia, “living classrooms of feminist pedagogy,” where abstract political theory was expertly translated into the accessible, critical discourse of everyday life (Zia 2018, 116). By

firmly rooting its core ideology in the Sindhi language, its rich folklore, and the collective memory of shared struggle, the Sindhyani Tehreek achieved the remarkable feat of articulating a powerful feminism that was neither derivative of external models nor separatist in its intent, but fundamentally integrative, thereby empowering women simultaneously as citizens, as vital workers, and as the indispensable cultural custodians of their heritage.

THE INDIGENIZATION OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS AND ENDURING LEGACY (2000 AND BEYOND)

By the dawning of the twenty-first century, the profound influence of the Sindhyani Tehreek had substantially extended far beyond its original political and organizational framework, leaving an indelible and transformative impact on the entire discourse of gender, class, and democracy within Sindh (Khan 2018, 132). The movement's enduring legacy can be systematically traced through both its substantive institutional contributions and its potent symbolic presence in the shared collective memory of the Sindhi people. Its numerous alumni went on to successfully establish a critical mass of literacy centers, viable women's cooperatives, and influential local NGOs that actively continued its foundational work in education, health, and economic empowerment. More profoundly, the movement's central emphasis on cultural identity as an indispensable form of empowerment inspired an entirely new generation of Sindhi writers, talented poets, and passionate activists who began the process of reinterpreting feminist thought through the unique and powerful lens of local idioms, rather than relying solely on imported or abstract theories (Baloch 1994, 91–93).

In this crucial respect, the Sindhyani Tehreek succeeded precisely where many contemporaneous movements faltered: it successfully **indigenized** feminism without diluting its radical political potency (Ahmad 2024, 89–91). This was achieved by firmly situating women's liberation within Sindh's specific linguistic, historical, and economic consciousness, providing a theoretical framework that was resistant to conservative critiques of Westernization. The transformation of feminist discourse in Sindh owes an enormous debt to the Tehreek's successful integration of activism and pedagogical practice (Weiss 1993, 329). The oral histories, the political narratives, and the revolutionary songs that were circulated widely among Sindhyani members have since been absorbed into Sindh's political folklore, maintaining a deep, emotional connection to the movement's core ideals and sustaining its revolutionary spirit long after its peak period of mass mobilization.

The Tehreek's unwavering insistence on structurally linking the issue of gender justice with the broader demand for provincial autonomy fundamentally challenged the centralized, often Punjab-centric narratives of Pakistani feminism, effectively expanding the political scope of women's identity to include ethnic and regional self-determination (Sodhar 2021, 188–90). Through its powerful and unique fusion of nationalism, socialism, and explicit gender awareness, it introduced a holistic, multi-layered framework for liberation that continues to profoundly influence both academic scholarship and on-the-ground activism. Scholarly works, such as the comprehensive *Feminism and Struggle of Sindhyani Tehreek* (2021), represent a formal academic recognition of this substantial contribution, meticulously documenting the

movement's immense intellectual and organizational depth (Sodhar 2021, 189).

However, a sober assessment of the Tehreek's trajectory also underscores the complex difficulties inherent in sustaining a radical grassroots movement within a profoundly patriarchal, class-divided society. The challenges were numerous and significant: the absence of consistent, reliable funding; recurrent political fragmentation within the broader Awami Tehreek; and the simultaneous rise of heavily-funded, depoliticized NGO-led feminism in the 2000s, which collectively diluted the movement's initial radical edge (Khan 2018, 133). Yet, its foundational, transformative ethos—its core commitment to radical self-reliance, deep cultural rootedness, and consensus-based, collective decision-making—remains an enduring and powerful model for contemporary grassroots movements, particularly those operating in marginalized rural areas across Sindh and southern Punjab (Zia 2018, 119–22). The continuity of its central ideas is clearly visible in current initiatives, such as the various Hari (Peasant) Women's Networks and the Sindhiyani Sangat organizations, which strongly attest to the movement's enduring practical and symbolic relevance. In the constantly evolving, dynamic landscape of Pakistani feminism, the Sindhiyani Tehreek stands as both a monumental historical milestone and a vibrant, living tradition, demonstrating conclusively that feminist resistance, when authentically embedded in local culture and committed to sustained class struggle, possesses the inherent resilience to transcend time and effectively reimagine the contours of freedom for new generations of activists.

A DEEPER MATERIALIST CRITIQUE OF FEUDAL PATRIARCHY

The Sindhiyani Tehreek's most radical contribution, perhaps, lies in its uncompromising materialist critique of the feudal system. Unlike feminist movements that focus primarily on legal abstract rights, the Tehreek placed the control of the means of production—land—at the heart of the women's struggle. The peasant woman (*Hari*) was subjected to a dual form of exploitation: as a laborer by the *wadera* (landlord), and as a wife/daughter by the patriarchal head of her own household (Lerner 1986, 28). This double burden meant that economic dependency and gender subordination were two sides of the same coin. The movement's education campaigns, therefore, did not just teach the alphabet; they taught land records, tenancy laws, and the economic history of Sindh (Burki 2009, 67).

This focus aligns strongly with the theoretical underpinnings of materialist feminism, which posits that the sexual division of labor, enforced by capitalist or pre-capitalist structures like feudalism, is the primary source of women's oppression (Brown 2012, 58). By fighting for the formal recognition of women's labor in the fields and demanding their legal right to inheritance, the Tehreek directly attacked the economic power base of both the feudal class and the male head of the family. The cooperatives established by the movement, though small, were micro-experiments in socialist economic organization, demonstrating that women could control production, manage finances, and break the cycle of debt that tied their families to the *wadera* (Ahmad 2024, 61). This was a structural, rather than merely superficial, challenge to the entire socio-economic edifice of rural Sindh, a political

stance far more radical than many of its national contemporaries.

Furthermore, the Sindhyani Tehreek critically analyzed the mechanisms of 'honor' (*ghairat*) as an ideological tool of feudal control (Khan 2006, 44). Honor killings, forced marriages, and restrictions on mobility were not viewed merely as cultural issues but as essential functions for maintaining the feudal economic order. By controlling women's sexuality and reproduction, the *wadera* class indirectly controlled the labor pool and prevented peasant families from migrating or organizing (Shaheed 2002, 114). The movement's direct, courageous intervention in cases of domestic and honour-related violence was thus a political intervention, disrupting the feudal-patriarchal alliance that managed social control. They treated the private sphere of the home as a political battleground, linking every act of domestic violence to the larger struggle against class exploitation and authoritarian governance. This intersectional clarity provided the Tehreek with a moral and ideological authority that transcended simple human rights advocacy and positioned it as a true agent of revolutionary change.

The profound impact of the *Sindh Ja Suraan* (Women of Sindh) poetry by Zarina Baloch cannot be overstated in this materialist struggle. Her verses provided a vernacular, accessible framework for understanding class and gender exploitation (Baloch 1994, 52). She transformed the abstract language of Marxist critique into the emotional, resonant language of Sufi poetry, using metaphors of the land, the river, and the peasant's toil to articulate the revolutionary message. For the illiterate Sindhi woman, a song was often the only available political pamphlet. This cultural translation was crucial; it meant that the

movement's ideology bypassed the traditional, literate, male-dominated gatekeepers of information and went straight into the heart of the rural community, creating a self-aware, politicized female readership and audience. The artistic output of the Tehreek became a primary source of political education, an organic and powerful tool for building a collective, class-conscious feminist identity that was resilient against both state repression and feudal ideology.

CONCLUSION

The history of the Sindhyani Tehreek definitively demonstrates that feminist resistance in Pakistan has never been a monolithic phenomenon but has always been profoundly contextual, intricately shaped by regional traditions, dynamic class dynamics, and the specific moral economy of everyday rural life (Zia 2018, 120). The movement's powerful emergence under the repressive weight of Zia-ul-Haq's martial law was not merely a predictable reaction to state repression but constituted a proactive, highly courageous assertion of women's political and intellectual subjectivity. Its unique, potent blend of Marxist-materialist principles and deep Sindhi cultural principles created a pioneering model of empowerment that was simultaneously rigorous, ideological, and intensely pragmatic. By deliberately embedding its complex feminist discourse in deeply local idioms, the Tehreek skillfully circumvented the conservative accusations of 'Westernization,' which were often used to discredit such movements, and successfully redefined activism through purely indigenous expressions of justice, dignity, and political self-respect. In this crucial respect, the Sindhyani Tehreek dramatically expanded the conceptual and practical horizons of Pakistani feminism, providing compelling proof that

fundamental liberation could and did emerge not from the comfortable, elite urban centers, but from the politically marginalized rural peripheries that the state and the feudal society had long chosen to ignore.

The most enduring and potent legacy of the Sindhyani Tehreek lies not just in its documented institutional achievements—the schools and cooperatives it founded—but most importantly, in its fundamental transformation of collective consciousness (Ahmad 2024, 90). Its pervasive literacy initiatives, grassroots health campaigns, and vibrant artistic expressions actively cultivated what Zarina Baloch famously termed the “awareness of being”—a profound, collective realization of women’s inherent and rightful place in history and political struggle. Despite facing severe political fragmentation, chronic limited financial resources, and the existential threat posed by non-politicized NGO-led initiatives, the movement achieved the revolutionary feat of transforming entrenched silence into articulate speech, systemic invisibility into defiant, public participation, and ingrained obedience into powerful, unified solidarity. Today, the powerful memory of the Sindhyani Tehreek actively endures and is invoked in the political songs sung at major Sindhi political gatherings and is clearly visible in the sustained activism of newer generations, who continue to consciously invoke its groundbreaking spirit. The Sindhyani Tehreek thus stands not only as a crucial, documented historical movement but as a continuing, living philosophy—an unwavering affirmation that the protracted struggle for women’s equality, when authentically rooted in local soil and sustained by an unyielding, collective will, becomes an enduring and fundamental act of resistance against all forms of hierarchical and authoritarian oppression.

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