A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis of U.S. and Pakistani Newspapers' Coverage on Gender Equality in Pakistan

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Abstract
This study critically compares how Pakistani and U.S. English-language newspapers represent gender equality across five WEF-based dimensions and examine how their discourses challenge or reinforce power structures. Pakistan ranks last among 148 countries in the 2025 WEF Global Gender Gap Report, indicating worsening gender parity. Pakistani media often marginalizes women's successes and frames them as victims, while U.S. media projects Pakistani gender issues through Western liberal lenses. Using systematic random sampling, the study analyzes opinion pieces, features, and magazine articles from Dawn, The News International, The New York Times, and USA Today (2022–2024), guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive discourse theory. Results show Dawn uses reformist, symbolic narratives and The News relies on crisis-driven frames. Both avoid deep structural critique. U.S. media emphasizes external aid. Pakistani outlets should adopt rights-based, accountability-focused narratives; U.S. media must report with nuanced, decolonial frames; future research should examine transgender representation and include vernacular platforms.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Pakistani, Newspapers, Gender Equality

Introduction
The media is an important and integral part of society. It plays an influential role in people's lives by providing news, information, ideas, opinions, etc. It can play a manifold role in promoting gender parity in the employment sector and the representation of male and female characters in the media, the fair gender portrayal and the use of gender-neutral language (GSDRC, 2015). The vast extent of the media's influence on society requires it to play a role in bringing positive change to society, including awareness regarding gender parity. The readers and viewers of media content create their identity in relation to the stories, characters and the news shown on the media. Thus, the media often creates and recreates people's opinions about themselves, others and the world. England (as cited in Ali & Batool, 2015) opines that the media is prone to affecting its readers and viewers' decision-making and ideological beliefs. Hence, the media's effects are far-reaching, from creating identities to shaping public opinion, influencing cultural norms, and reinforcing or challenging societal ideologies.

Regarding female portrayal around the world, fair gender representation should be a fundamental, professional and ethical goal, parallel to accuracy, fairness, and honesty (White, 2009, as cited in GSDRC, 2015). Nonetheless, gender inequality remains widespread in the media. A report on the Global Media Monitoring Project revealed that women are often depicted as victims and

in relation to their family roles. They seldom appear as spokesperson or experts. Marginalised groups of women, such as the poor, elderly and ethnic or religious minorities, are even more underrepresented in the media (GSDRC, 2015). This shows an alarming situation requiring immediate and honest action to give the rightful fair representation in all types of media, as women are half the population. They cannot be neglected or marginalised in news coverage as their voices, achievements, and concerns are as significant as those of their opposite gender.

Gender stereotypes also heavily characterise the media content, ranging from women being homemakers, caregivers, dependent and objectified to men being the dominant and powerful. Such an imbalanced representation of women and men may influence society's expectations of both genders as well as their expectations of themselves (Syed, S. B, et al., 2023). For this situation to improve, it is often recommended that conscious efforts should be made to portray men and women in non-stereotypical roles.

As regards the Pakistani media's gender representation, Asghar and Akhter (2022) stated that women are underrepresented in Pakistani media. In their analysis of Pakistani English newspapers' editorial analysis over a decade, women were mostly shown as a minority and as victims. Such results signal that Pakistan's situation is no less different from the rest of the world, and the media and society should be awakened to the urgent and dire need for fair and balanced gender representation. Portraying women in diverse and empowering roles can contribute to challenging stereotypes, promoting gender equality, and contributing to a more progressive and inclusive society.

Gender equality, according to the United Nations website, means equality in rights, duties and opportunities between men and women (United Nations, n.d.). Gender equality is also a human right that guarantees equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities for all people, regardless of gender (United Nations, n.d.). It is an essential part of sustainable development and reducing poverty. United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal number 5 includes "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations, n.d.). These goals were adopted in 2015 and are to be implemented till 2030. Sustainable Development Goals commit to abolishing all types of discrimination and violence against women. Pakistan also adopted these goals as its National Development Agenda 2016 and is committed to fulfilling these goals. Achieving gender equality in Pakistan is a major challenge since Pakistan ranked 145th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) 2024 Global Gender Gap Index. This is in decline from its 142nd position in 2023. This indicates that the situation for women in Pakistan is worsening. WEF assesses a country's gender parity based on four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. This study also includes a crucial fifth dimension, which is protection from gender-based crimes such as honour killings, domestic violence, rape, and harassment etc.

Discourse, as defined by Harris (as cited in Pragmatics and Discourse, n.d.), is a stretch of language longer than one utterance. Discourse analysis studies larger chunks of language, such as texts, speeches, and advertisements, as opposed to the traditional approach, which focuses on the analysis of language at and below the level of the sentence (Abbas et al., 2024). Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA) examines how discourse originates from social conventions and contributes to the creation of (un)equal power relations and dominance (Ahmed, D. et al., 2024). Norman Fairclough is considered one of the founding figures of CDA. Fairclough (1996) posits that language use is socially determined, as people employ language in accordance with societal norms to maintain or change social relationships.

Fairclough formulated a three-dimensional model of discourse analysis to investigate the production and reception processes underlying discourse. This model comprises three processes of analysis – description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough, 1996). This model appears comprehensive as it takes into account of all the major aspects of a discourse study, ranging from vocabulary analysis to grammar and large-scale textual structures.

CDA is a research method that analyses media discourse to ascertain how media, through language, constructs or challenges gender stereotypes, gender power imbalances and societal norms. It is a well-established field and studies employing CDA on media discourse appear frequently. An example can be the research by Kiani et al. (2023), which investigated Pakistani Urdu dramas using Van Dijk's theory and Robin Lakoff's deficit theory to deconstruct gender representation. They found that electronic media often portrays women as weak, indecisive, dependent and unassertive. The research also noted that the trends are changing, and women were represented as empowered and confronting.

Another study by Qazi and Farooq (2020) analysed Malala's representation in two different Pakistani English newspapers (Daily Times and The News International) and the effect of their respective ideologies on their reporting. Daily Times named and presented Malala's attackers with full agency, while The News International often used discursive strategies to avoid naming them. Daily Times leans towards liberal and leftist ideology while the news international is considered conservative and pro-government. This study revealed how newspapers' ideologies can significantly impact their framing techniques and representation strategies.

This study has a few limitations. Firstly, it does not include other media formats, such as editorials, news reports, etc., from Pakistani and US newspapers, due to inconsistent availability of such genres (like editorials or news reports) from U.S. newspapers. Secondly, all Pakistani and US newspapers have not been selected due to feasibility issues. Thirdly, a limited number of articles on each dimension each year are selected to ensure manageability. The purposeful selection of a small number of articles per year may not capture the full diversity or frequency of gender-related coverage during the period. Lastly, all selected newspapers are English-language publications and do not include vernacular press coverage, which may limit the representation of local perspectives on gender issues in Pakistan.

Significance of the Research
The implications of the present study on the U.S. and Pakistani newspapers' framing of gender equality in Pakistan are manifold. It is significant for multiple stakeholders such as journalists, readers, gender rights activists, policymakers, academics, and social justice advocates. For journalists, it reveals possible gender biases and stereotypes within gender equality narratives themselves. It can also expose neglected areas in gender parity discourse. Secondly, it offers awareness

to general newspaper readers to be sensitive to unconscious gender biases and the media ideologies behind women's representation in the media. Lastly, it also enlightens gender rights activists, policymakers, academics, and social justice advocates to tackle systematic reforms and cultural and attitudinal changes.

Research Objectives
The aims of this research are:
- To deconstruct the representation of gender equality in Pakistan in Pakistani and US English-language newspapers.
- To explore the way the five dimensions of gender parity are discussed in columns related to gender issues published in Pakistani English-language newspapers.
- To analyse how Pakistani and US English-language newspapers use discursive strategies to challenge or reinforce existing power structures.

Research Questions
The present study will address the following questions:
1. How is gender equality in Pakistan represented in Pakistani and US English-language newspapers?
2. How the five dimensions of gender parity are discussed in columns related to gender issues published in Pakistani English-language newspapers?
3. How do Pakistani and US English-language newspapers use discursive strategies to challenge or reinforce existing power structures?

Problem Statement
Pakistan ranks last among 148 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF), a decline from Pakistan's 145th position in 2024. This indicates Pakistan's deteriorating position in gender parity. Pakistan is also a signatory to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which prioritise equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for men and women by 2030. Against this backdrop, different studies have pointed to women's under-representation in Pakistani English newspapers (Asghar and Akhter, 2022) and more focus on women's victimisation than their empowerment (Yaseen et al., 2023). Khan (2022) discovered that UK newspapers present Muslim women through a lens of otherness, bias and frequent framing as terrorists and deviants from Western culture. Considering all these factors, this research examines gender equality in Pakistan from a broader perspective by encompassing WEF's dimensions of gender parity. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender inclusivity and media representation and helps highlight the local and international media's role in shaping narratives around women's empowerment.

Literature Review
This literature review aims to understand the phenomenon of gender equality in Pakistan through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The studies described in this section were within the time frame of the past five years, that is, 2019-2024. As well, they are recounted in chronological order from the newest to the oldest.
Yaseen et al. (2023) analysed discursive strategies used by *The Express Tribune* to examine gender discrimination. All headlines related to gender issues were

selected as a sample from March 2017 to March 2021. The authors then randomly selected some headlines to examine them according to Van Dijk's theory of media analysis. The results showed that newspapers generally covered the news that showed gender issues such as rape, harassment, domestic violence, etc. They rarely reported news highlighting women's success, their positive contribution to society, etc. In this way, they mostly presented women in a stereotyped manner, focusing on their inferiority, oppression, and discrimination. The negative news created hype and drew the attention of readers towards the subjugation of women in Pakistan.

As well, the newspaper covered biased and misleading representations of a popular slogan "*Mera jism, meri marzi*", and contributed to a negative depiction of women's plight in Pakistan. Lastly, the analysis opined that Pakistani newspaper coverage plays a role in maintaining gender inequality in Pakistan. The study's findings are important in the context of the present research. However, Yaseen et al. (2023) chose only one newspaper. They did not include other sub-genres of newspaper reporting, such as editorials, opinion pieces, and magazine articles, which the present research aims to incorporate. The inclusion of all the parts of a newspaper will help in arriving at a comprehensive conclusion about whether or not Pakistani women are misrepresented and whether gender bias is prevalent in Pakistani English newspapers.

Iqbal et al. (2022) examined the concept of "othering" in Pakistani English print media. "Othering" refers to a sense of not being included or belonging to a certain group. In the past, women were othered by being portrayed as different, unequal, inferior and not suitable for male-dominated fields. The study sought to identify whether Pakistani newspapers othered women in their representation. The sample was taken from *The Nation* newspaper from March 1, 2020, to April 30, 2020. Fairclough and Van Dijk's theories were used as research methodology to reveal how linguistic choices in news reports contribute to the marginalisation and "othering" of women, perpetuating gender stereotypes and reinforcing patriarchal norms.

The results showed that the current portrayal of women has changed for the better. Women were depicted in successful roles such as players, brand ambassadors, broadcasters, professional degree holders, etc. This meant that women were no longer "othered" and were given equal status as men in terms of achievements, prominence carrying national glory, and more. *The Nation* rejected the notion of othering through their portrayal of a winning female player as being the nation's pride. Their ambitions were presented vigorously and energetically. The choice of vocabulary showcased the newspapers' focus on women's encouragement and motivation. The modern way of portraying women's achievements, ambitions, and roles in male-dominated fields contributes to diminishing the concept of othering of women. Such a representation focusing on women's successes rather than their suffering inspires and supports women and transforms society's ideologies towards females. Overall, this study provides critical insights into how the media shapes public perceptions of women, contributing to the spreading or challenging of problematic norms and female marginalization. By dissecting these patterns, the research emphasises the need for more equitable and gender-sensitive media practices in Pakistan. The concept of othering can also be valuable to study in the context of the present research.

Khan (2022) provides a compelling examination of how Muslim women are portrayed in both Pakistani and UK media. Utilising the amended approach, the study employed Fairclough's and Van Dijk's theories. They collected articles from *The Times* (UK) and *Dawn* (Pakistan) from June to December 2020 and were searched through the Keyword in Context Indexing (KWIC) sampling technique. Out of 17 and 6 articles from *The Times* and *Dawn*, respectively, in the selected period, the researchers chose only one article from each newspaper. The analysis revealed that UK media often frames Muslim women through a lens of otherness and bias, representing both Muslim women and men stereotypically and frequently describing them using words such as terrorist, extremist, violent and deviants from Western values. The terrorist activities of some Muslim women were generalised to portray all Muslim women negatively. In contrast, Pakistani newspapers tend to depict Muslim women as oppressed, subjugated and victims of patriarchy. Society, government and laws contribute to depriving women of their rights. The analysis reveals that Pakistani media sometimes reinforces traditional gender roles and overlooks the diverse experiences of women within the Muslim community.

Two main problems arise from this article. One is the sampling technique and the other is the population. The authors only analysed two articles, each one from one British and Pakistani newspapers. They should have selected more articles to present a varied and nuanced picture. Their selection of samples leads to biased analysis and one side of the picture. The other problem relates to the population. The British article talks about the British Muslim community, where Muslims are a minority and Western ideology is dominant. The Dawn article discusses the state of Pakistani Muslims. The two types of communities – British Muslims as opposed to Pakistani Muslims – are different populations with their own realities, contexts and representations. Thus, their representation is bound to be different by two different newspapers in different geographical and socio-cultural realities. The present research is an attempt to fill the research gap by taking numerous articles about Pakistani women, a single community, from the viewpoints of two different types of media (the US and the Pakistani newspapers).

Asghar et al. (2022) conducted a collocation analysis of 270 editorials published in Pakistani English newspapers from 2010 to 2020. Their research utilised the corpus tool AntConc for the quantitative analysis and Baker's approach as a theoretical basis. The collocation analysis showed that those words associated with men collated with words that showed power, authority, superiority and respect. The words collocating with women showed mixed trends. Mostly, they represented gender inequality, subjugation, patriarchy, being paid less, and their asking for divorce as an alleged demand, among others. Some editorials also emphasised women's success stories in business, the corporate sector, agriculture, as well as homemaking. Such representation is problematic as it stereotypes women and focuses more on women's issues and less on their importance in society. Men were also over-represented since female issues were less discussed than male issues. Lastly, men in the study's corpus were addressed in relation to their jobs, such as politicians, bureaucrats, players, etc. On the other hand, women are mentioned regarding their families, status, and appearances. This study can also assist in the present research by providing a theoretical approach, the corpus tool, and data analysis techniques.

Qazi and Farooq (2020) explored the representation and identity construction of

Malala Yousafzai in editorials of two leading Pakistani English newspapers: *The News International* and *The Daily Times*. They applied Fairclough's three-dimensional model to understand three key phases in her life – "Malala the Taliban's target", "the Nobel laureate", and "Malala the United Nations Messenger of Peace". The analysis uncovered that both newspapers hailed Malala's achievements, courage and patriotism in all three phases, thus constructing a positive identity. However, both newspapers differed in their representation of Malala's attackers. The *Daily Times* chose to name the attackers and presented them with full agency. *The News International*, however, avoided naming the attackers as well as other entities such as the authorities through utilising many discourse strategies such as passive constructions and indeterminate terms like "they" when referring to the terrorists, etc.

Daily Times openly condemned the Taliban and their terrorist activities while also praising Malala in hyperbolic language and presenting her as an unbeatable hero. Finally, the analysis shows the differences in both newspapers' ideological stances. The News International attempted to consider conservative sections of society while commenting on Malala's attack, thus aligning with the central right. Daily Times, however, sided with the liberal ideology when highlighting the attackers, projection of USA policies and strong criticism of Pakistani authorities. This study can be crucial for the present research as it reveals newspapers' biases, ideologies and linguistic and discursive strategies when reporting on ideologically charged issues such as the representation of prominent females. Qazi and Farooq (2020) provided the researcher with a choice of Pakistani English newspapers to study coverage of gender equality in Pakistan.

The review of related studies shows that most studies covering female coverage in Pakistani English newspapers focus especially on specific sub-genres of newspapers, such as headlines, news articles, entertainment news, or editorials. There is a dearth of studies focusing specifically on newspaper columns, magazine articles and feature articles to investigate gender representation in general. Thus, this study attempts to bridge this gap by studying newspaper opinion pieces, op-eds, magazine articles, and feature articles. The study also considers more than one Pakistani English newspaper, as some studies have only focused on one newspaper and produced differing results, potentially due to ideological differences in newspapers' policies. Thus, such concern is addressed in the present study as it seeks to collect data from different newspapers to study data from multiple ideological viewpoints. Lastly, there is a dearth of literature on non-U.S. nations' representation in U.S. print media concerning gender parity or the comparison between the two countries' media on the issue of gender coverage. The present study aims to fill this gap by analysing the US and Pakistani newspapers' coverage of gender equality in Pakistan.

Material and Methods
This study falls within the exploratory research type, and the research method is qualitative. The theoretical framework utilised is two key theories to study gender equality in the US and Pakistani newspapers. The first one is Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. It is a structured approach, encompassing (1) textual features (vocabulary, grammar, and coherence), (2) discursive practices (production, circulation, and

interpretation of news), and (3) socio-cultural contexts influencing discourse. This model is essential to understand the way newspapers construct narratives about gender equality, giving weightage to all crucial aspects of gender equality and does their ideological inclination impacts the portrayal of gender rights in Pakistan.

Teun A. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive discourse theory also complements the above theory. It focuses on the role of cognition in shaping and interpreting discourse. The approach foregrounds the media's role in influencing public perceptions, either reinforcing or challenging stereotypes and highlighting women's struggles, recognition and rights. Another important consideration while opting for Dijk's theory is its regard for the Us versus Them dichotomy. It can help understand how the US media constructs narratives around "them" in Pakistan and how Pakistani media reports "us" Pakistanis. These two frameworks enable a comprehensive analysis of linguistic choices, ideological structures, and socio-political contexts shaping media narratives on gender parity.

The population of the current research is opinion-based articles from two Pakistani and two US newspapers. It consists of op-eds, columns, opinion pieces, magazine articles, feature articles, etc. While the researcher could have focused solely on opinion pieces (op-eds), this approach would have been limiting due to the absence of many important topics that are covered primarily in magazine and feature articles.

The reason the researcher grouped opinion pieces, feature articles and magazine articles into one umbrella category because sometimes opinion pieces were not available on a topic in the frequency required to conduct proper research. Feature and magazine articles provided similar types of opinionated and interpretive content. Thus, they fall under a larger opinion-based or interpretive journalism. In journalism, opinion pieces, magazine articles and feature articles are different formats. However, they often share characteristics. For example, they are less newsy meaning they are not hard facts like straight news articles. They usually involve interpretation, analysis, commentary or in-depth narrative. Features and magazine article often have subjective angles, storytelling and authorial voice. Hence, they are closer to opinion pieces than to hard news.

Moreover, the present study does not include news reports and editorials due to consistency issues. US newspapers did not publish news stories and editorials on gender equality in Pakistan. Therefore, the researcher did not include news stories and editorials from Pakistani newspapers as well. Five crucial aspects of gender equity are chosen to select columns from Pakistani English newspapers. There was a concern that key dimensions of gender equality might have been overlooked if the researcher had chosen random sampling of all articles related to gender parity. Thus, the researcher developed a list of five important aspects of gender justice. Four aspects have been taken from WEF's gender equality dimensions, namely economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The researcher included a fifth significant component which is protection from gender-based crimes.

In order to reduce bias and provide a representative sample, the researcher opted for systematic random sampling rather than simple random sampling.

Systematic random sampling is a random sampling method that selects samples on the basis of a system of intervals. For example, a person can hand over a questionnaire to every second person in a shopping mall. Following this sampling technique, the researcher included every second article from every category (for example, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and so on) each year 2022-2024 for every newspaper. The time period selected is 1st January 2022 to 31st December 2024. This makes 15 articles from each newspaper for women's rights. All the articles selected are listed in Table 1, which can help illustrate the sampling procedure. The justification for the selected time period is that it provides sufficient data for rigorous CDA to explore current trends. This period marks important national and global events that directly or indirectly affected gender equality narratives. Examples include the after-math of the COVID-19 period, 2022 floods in Pakistan and other environmental crises, and 2024 general elections in Pakistan. It also avoids overly broad timelines that may weaken the focus but is still long enough to observe trends and changes in discourse.

Additionally, the researcher selected every second column (date-wise) from each year since, in the protection from gender-based crimes category, some newspapers published only two columns. Therefore, the researcher cannot adopt any other criteria other than every second article if columns published in the category are more than one. Columns were selected based on their themes and central ideas. Only those columns are selected whose main idea aligns with the category. For example, in the category of economic participation and opportunity, only those columns are selected whose subject, title and main idea is women's economic participation. Columns briefly discussing such issues are not considered.

If no column appears on a specific subject such as female education, other articles on gender issues are consulted if the same subject has been discussed partially. It happened in the year 2022 wherein Dawn published no article on female education. Therefore, another article interlinking female education with other issues such as economic disparity, was analysed. If one column mainly talks about economics and briefly mentions women's educational needs, it is not analysed again in the educational needs section. In US newspapers during 2022-2024, only three columns were published on gender issues in Pakistan, and they were analysed in this study. These columns were published in The New York Times (two columns) and USA Today (one column). Lastly, as this research focused only on gender equality in Pakistan, columns on Afghan women's educational needs or articles on harassment and other gender-based crimes faced by Indian women were not included.

Data Analysis

In analysing *Dawn* and *The News International*, there are both similarities and clear differences in how they frame gender issues in Pakistan. On female economic participation, *Dawn* uses a national, reformist frame rooted in progressive feminism and collective responsibility, while *The News* adopts a global, crisis-driven tone shaped by neoliberal feminism, both offering token solutions like corporate initiatives and avoiding direct mention of patriarchy. For educational attainment, *Dawn* links girls' education to national development and justice using expert-backed discourse, whereas *The News* relies on emotional

storytelling, highlighting personal struggles. The News holds the state responsible and proposes structural reforms. The former frames education as a right, the latter as an economic tool. Regarding health and survival, *Dawn* critiques patriarchal norms through a feminist lens, using an alarmist tone and emphasizing empowerment, while *The News* focuses on socio-economic neglect with a more policy-based but less critical approach; both lack clear accountability and often use passive constructions. In female political empowerment, *Dawn* shares symbolic success stories but ignores systemic barriers, while *The News* addresses societal and legal hurdles critically, yet fails to name responsible institutions or offer concrete reforms. On gender-based crimes, *Dawn* takes a politically charged stance, exposing state inaction, while *The News* offers emotionally driven reformist narratives; both obscure agency through language, limiting structural critique.

As for US newspapers, The New York Times frames gender rights in Pakistan through a Western liberal human rights lens, portraying women as active agents and trans individuals as victims of societal exclusion. It contrasts progressive movements with conservative forces, using ideological polarisation and Western validation (e.g., Human Rights Watch) to reinforce the narrative of Pakistan as a gender-oppressive society. By contrast, USA Today adopts a positive, solution-oriented narrative that emphasizes education (via TCF-USA) as a tool for gender empowerment, but frames change as externally driven. Local voices are largely absent, reinforcing a Western development perspective and subtly promoting the idea that Pakistan needs foreign intervention to progress. Overall, U.S. media constructs gender struggles in Pakistan as part of a global progress vs. conservatism discourse, often sidelining indigenous efforts and amplifying Western actors as key change-makers.

Results and Discussion

As for the answer to the first research question, "How is gender equality in Pakistan represented in Pakistani and US English-language newspapers?" Dawn and The News International represent gender equality differently. Dawn focuses on reformist, rights-based approaches to advocate for systemic changes with an optimistic tone. However, Dawn's solutions are mostly surface-level without demanding deeper structural change. At the same time, The News International aligns with global feminist discourses by using urgent and crisis-driven language and framing gender parity within neoliberal economic frameworks. With regard to US newspapers, The New York Times portrays gender struggles, including transgender rights, in Pakistan through a Western liberal framework by emphasizing activism and legal progress against societal resistance. USA Today, however, takes a less adversarial and interventionist approach. It frames external influences as catalysts for change.

The differing representations of gender equality in both Pakistani newspapers can be attributed to their distinct target audiences and ideological orientations. Dawn is considered Pakistan's most widely circulated English-language newspaper and maintains progressive and secular editorial stance (Shahzad, 2024). Its readership is mainly urban, educated, and liberal audiences who are more receptive to empirical analysis, moderate and optimistic portrayals of gender issues. Dawn calls for surface-level reform, civil society advocacy, and general awareness. However, it avoids radical structural critiques that could

alienate its core audience. It thus maintains a progressive but institutionally non-confrontational tone. By contrast, The News has a more conservative and elite readership (Nawaz & Ali, 2016) and a right-leaning editorial policy (Shahzad, 2024). It frames gender equality within a crisis-driven and neoliberal paradigm. This reflects a global perspective and a neoliberal orientation that considers gender parity as a prerequisite for economic development. The News occasionally adopts a confrontational tone, calls for structural reforms, and draws frequent comparisons with international standards. This may be intended to pressure state institutions or appeal to elite readers who value performance metrics and governance indicators.

The US newspapers' coverage is influenced by Western liberal human rights discourse. The NY Times is considered for its liberal orientation. It constructs Pakistani gender issues within a binary of progress versus conservatism. USA Today, by contrast, maintains a centrist and less confrontational approach. It reports on institutional efforts and foreign involvement as agents of change. This exhibits the newspaper's preference for solution-oriented journalism. As well, it resonates with its mainstream American audience, which may be less familiar with or invested in Pakistan's internal gender dynamics. Both outlets rely heavily on Western sources of legitimacy to showcase gender issues in Pakistan. This is a typical Western media tendency to project universalist norms onto non-Western societies. Lastly, the 'Self' (liberal feminists, human rights activists) is positively represented, and the 'Other' (conservatives, religious-nationalists) is framed as barriers to progress. In this "Us vs. Them" dichotomy, Pakistan is constructed as the cultural "Other" struggling to meet Western standards of gender justice. In sum, U.S. media serve dual purposes. It aligns with the human rights values of their readers as well as inconspicuously validates Western involvement in global gender development.

The second research question, "How are the five dimensions of gender parity discussed in columns related to gender issues published in Pakistani English-language newspapers?" can be answered as Dawn leans towards advocacy, empirical analysis, and a reformist outlook, but rarely demands accountability or systemic change. The News International is more confrontational and stresses policy failures and systemic accountability. While The News uses some reformist and critical language, its discursive strategies still rely on vague or symbolic framing. Hence, they partially reinforce power structures. Dawn and The News International adopt distinct approaches to discussing gender parity. Dawn highlights structural barriers like patriarchy but not government accountability, legal discourse, and reformist advocacy. Whereas, The News International takes a crisis-driven, policy-focused stance and occasionally demands systemic accountability and structural reforms. Dawn frames issues like education, health, and gender-based violence through empirical analysis and rights-based narratives, whereas The News International employs emotive storytelling, global comparisons, and urgent calls for policy action. Overall, Dawn critiques gender inequality analytically and reformatively. On the other hand, The News International is more confrontational and occasionally discusses institutional failures and demands immediate change. In both cases, discursive strategies underscore individual empowerment or external support over state responsibility. Thus, they reinforce existing power structures despite surface-level calls for change.

The answer to the third research question, "How do Pakistani and US English-language newspapers use discursive strategies to challenge or reinforce existing power structures?" is detailed below. The answer is that both Pakistani and US newspapers use discursive strategies to conceal power structures. First Pakistani newspapers' analysis is provided, then a comparison with US newspapers is made.

Hidden Power Structures and Unclear Agency
Euphemism
Both Pakistani newspapers refrain from directly naming patriarchy, male dominance or institutional misogyny as a system of power against women's economic role. Most of them use vague terms like "cultural" and "resource-related factors" as responsible for women's lower employment rates (for instance, in Dawn's "Employing the Other Half" column).

Passivisation and Vagueness
In Dawn, there is indirect and subtle criticism of societal norms through the passive voice and vagueness in "Employing the Other Half." Examples: "Women and their families need to feel comfortable in educational institutions and workplaces". This sentence shifts the burden or responsibility onto women and their families (they "need to feel comfortable") rather than onto institutions, which may actually be the source of discomfort. Another example is "The capabilities of a married woman were judged differently from an unmarried one." In this sentence, it is not clear who does this judging: the community? Employers? In-laws? The effect is that agency is hidden again, and systems of power remain unchallenged.

Vagueness
The use of neutral language hides oppression, as in Dawn's column "Employing the Other Half": *"I also saw friends who obtained higher education did not pursue their careers due to cultural reasons."*. Here, "Cultural reasons" is a vague euphemism that masks the coercive power of in-laws, husbands, or community pressures.

Economic Rationalization versus Rights-Based Framing
Lexicalization
Both Dawn and The News International columns argue for women's employment as it boosts economic progress and prosperity, and times of economic recession require female economic participation. For example, Dawn's column "Moving the Needle on GDP" advocates for women's employment in economic terms (for example, if female labour force participation (FLFP) were at par with men, Pakistan's GDP could go up by 60pc by 2025). This utilitarian argument portrays women's value only in terms of productivity, not as a matter of justice, equality, or rights. Such framing presents gender equality as a national development issue rather than a women's rights concern. It also regards women as human capital rather than as full citizens.

Limited Focus on Structural and Governmental Accountability
Both Dawn and the News articles oftentimes do not focus on social structures,

taboos, institutional failures, or the government's responsibility. Sometimes, an article published in Dawn (Women's Health) discusses patriarchy and women's lower status as causes of women's poor health. It, however, does not point to policy gaps, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, or lack of political will. The article focuses more on female disempowerment and less on possible practical solutions for empowering women.

The News column "Let's Prioritise Girl's Education" solely highlights issues (both societal and policy level). However, it does not hold the government accountable for its absence of provision of resources for poverty-stricken families to support female education. In this way, it is less confrontational to the government's roles and failures and does not call for institutional accountability, systematic reforms and policy interventions.

Passivization

The News article "The Gendered Costs of Climate Change" mentions Pakistan's disaster unpreparedness and incapacity but does not explicitly examine why the government has failed to address these issues. It does not discuss societal barriers and institutional failings or hold the government accountable. Moreover, it also overly relies on passive constructions, which indicates the lack of explicit responsibility in the article's framing. Example of these passive constructions is "Women's healthcare needs, however, unique to SRHR, were predominantly overlooked".

There is a persistent issue in all three The News columns where passive constructions were most frequently used to hide agency of powerful structures, systemic inequalities, and to obscure responsibility. The column "Political Toll on Women" uses passive uses passive voice frequently, such as in "women are the most affected by the ongoing crisis", "women have been the frontline victims of political violence. It is feared that…violence against women…will escalate". There are unclear agents as subjects. The problematic aspect is that the discourse does not identify who is responsible for the violence.

The News column "Violence, Gender and Politics" uses the passive voice to avoid explicitly naming those in power as perpetrators of injustice or hiding agency. Examples include "Space for women in politics is limited, and violence and harassment against them have not ended." This sentence states a fact but lacks agency. It does not specify who is limiting their space. The column could have used more explicit wording. This would highlight the institutions, parties, or societal forces actively restricting women's participation instead of framing it as an abstract condition.

Nominalization

An example of nominalisation (which turns actions or processes into abstract nouns) in Dawn's column "Unsafe Spaces" is "Several laws on domestic violence, honour killings, harassment at workplaces and early child marriages are in place, but implementation and application of these laws remains weak or negligible". The paragraph is unspecific about the entity responsible for this failure. The use of nominalization and agentless phrases obscures which institutions or actors are failing to act (e.g., law enforcement, courts, policymakers). CDA stresses the importance of making power holders visible, which this paragraph fails to do.

Hedging

The hedging strategy is also used in Dawn's article "Unsafe Spaces". It makes agency invisible, as in "A strong perception still prevails among a large section of the police and judiciary that domestic violence is a private matter and should be resolved at the family level". The word "perception" is problematic as it softens the issue. It also distances the writer from directly accusing the police or judiciary of enabling violence or denying justice. It frames misogynistic beliefs as a matter of opinion, not institutional failure.

Challenging Existing Power Structures

The positive aspects are the explicit mention of patriarchy, institutional failures in educational attainment, health and survival, and gender-based crimes. Overall, The News is apparently better in naming and holding powerful institutions accountable for gender disparity and calling for state-level structural changes. The News' two columns, "Teach the Girl Child" and "Empowering Girls", hold the state and government policies responsible for the low female literacy rate and suggest structural changes as solutions.

The column "Teach the Girl Child" holds the state and political parties accountable for the low female literacy rate and offers policy-level and structural changes to improve the female literacy rate in Pakistan. It calls for state responsibilities and provides long-term and structural reforms for systemic change. It includes a detailed roadmap consisting of campaigns, digital platforms, school infrastructure, and integration of this issue into political manifestos and parliamentary discussions. The "empowering girls" article implicitly criticises the government policies with words such as "inequitable education financing, policy inconsistencies and a lack of shared political vision". The writer suggested structural changes to promote girls' education in Pakistan. They comprise expansion of middle and secondary schools, financial aid and safe transport for girls, gender-sensitive curricula, vocational and ICT training. Further recommendations are stronger counselling and protection mechanisms, political consensus on education reform, and increased transparency and accountability to ensure sustained policy implementation and national consensus on the charter of education. Lastly, the "Women's Health" article published in Dawn discussed patriarchy and women's lower status as causes of women's poor health.

Pakistani newspapers tend to use discursive strategies that serve to reinforce existing power structures instead of challenging them. They often use euphemism, passivisation, and vague language, which obscures institutional and patriarchal accountability. While The News is somewhat more assertive in naming state failures and proposing structural reforms, both newspapers tend to avoid constant accountability. They also frequently offer tokenistic or externally driven solutions. By contrast, both US newspapers frame gender equality through a Western human rights framework. The NY Times uses an overtly critical stance and active voice along with ideologically charged language. It reports power struggles between progressive movements and conservative forces, and thus more directly challenges dominant systems. USA Today presents the idea of externally driven change by focusing on NGO-led progress. In sum, U.S. media is more explicit in confronting power, yet still maintains a hierarchical global discourse. Whereas, Pakistani media avoid direct ideological conflict and subtly maintain domestic power structures by avoiding direct critique and

systemic demands (Ahmad et al., 2021: Ahmad et al., 2024).

The most noticeable aspect of literature review studies was whether Pakistani media represented women as either oppressed, victimised and disempowered or empowered, successful, given agency, and actively participating in social, political, and economic spheres. Almost all studies centered around the analysis of editorials, entertainment news, crime news, news regarding gender issues, rape, specific politicians like Maryam Nawaz and their specific statements, specific events like Aurat March and Pakistani dramas (Ahmed et al., 2020). Only one research Khan (2022), studied UK and Pakistani media columns. They took only one article from The Times (UK) and Dawn (Pakistan). Apart from that, there was no other research on opinion columns on gender equality in Pakistani English newspapers. Owing to different research focuses and a general theme of research findings in most studies, the connection between the present study's findings and the literature review is hard to build.

In the present study, most articles, especially on female economic participation, educational attainment and health, revolve around the reasons why women should work, get an education, the role of female education and employment in improving in country's GDP. Additionally, they also focused on climate change, structural problems like transport and availability of schools and proposed solutions to improve female economic and educational participation. In the last two dimensions, that is, political engagement and gender-based crimes, there was an empowering as well as a victimisation discourse. The News International article "Political toll on women" focuses on the political violence faced by women and their victimhood regarding the lower representation in the electoral roll. The violence, gender and politics article in The News also discusses limited political space for women, and violence, harassment and the state's crackdown on female political activists faced by them. All articles in gender-based crimes analysed emotional, physical and verbal violence faced by women inflicted through husbands, family members, and the state. Even in these articles, Dawn focused more on examples of female empowerment, like Heer Sohu or Mahrang Baloch, in a highly conservative Baloch society. However, female subjugation was more prevalent in both newspapers in the two above-mentioned categories.

The US newspapers' articles can be compared with Khan (2022), who analysed the UK's media coverage of Muslim women in Britain. This study's findings reveal similar ideological framing. The New York Times articles rely excessively on Western liberal human rights discourse. They present women and transgender activists as either empowered agents or as victims of societal exclusion. Like UK media in Khan's (2022) study, The New York Times also creates ideological polarisation through language. The NY Times portrays progressives and feminists as "Us" and conservatives as regressive forces or "Them". USA Today, instead, opted for a softer and solution-oriented narrative and approach and avoided ideological confrontation. However, it proposed the same narrative presented in both UK media as well as The NY Times that change in Pakistan is primarily facilitated through external support or Western involvement. This means that Western media, whether US or UK media, frames gender struggles in Pakistan through externally defined liberal frameworks. It also often reinforces binaries of modernity versus tradition or progress versus patriarchy.

Elyas and Aljabri (2020) also show that Western media employs a liberal human rights framework when reporting on Saudi women, with Orientalist discourse. This discourse centers cultural backwardness and the West's moral authority. Like Elyas and Aljabri, this research observes the inconsistency in how agency is distributed. Western media tends to attribute progress either to external influence or selected elite actors, rather than broader grassroots efforts or indigenous socio-political dynamics. Lastly, there is validation through Western institutions, where Elyas and Aljabri (2020) found that reform was legitimised through reference to international norms and Western approval. In the same way, US newspapers present Western aid as the driver of educational reform. They support the image of Pakistan as a recipient of Western wisdom.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

The study analyses opinion and feature articles from Pakistani (Dawn, The News) and U.S. (NYT, USA Today) newspapers using Fairclough's and Van Dijk's discourse models, focusing on five gender equality dimensions from 2022 to 2024. Pakistani newspapers use reformist or crisis-based narratives but largely reinforce patriarchal power structures through vague, euphemistic language. U.S. newspapers adopt more direct, critical tones rooted in Western liberal ideologies. Media discourse in both contexts shapes and limits gender equality narratives. Pakistani media avoids direct accountability, while U.S. media promotes externally driven change, reflecting persistent global power hierarchies.

As for recommendations for future researchers, they can analyse transgender representation in Pakistani media by taking the WEF's dimensions of gender equality and see whether they are underrepresented or not. They can also analyse whether certain events (such as the 2018 bill on transgender rights) prompted an increase in their coverage or not. They can also compare Pakistani media with newspapers in other non-Western contexts to counterbalance U.S.-centric perspectives. Lastly, they can extend analysis to include vernacular newspapers, social media opinion pieces, or alternative media outlets in Pakistan to capture wider discourse trends.

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