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Modern and Marginalised: Urban women in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper explores the interaction of modernity and piety for urban women in Pakistan. Its focus is recent change in Pakistan, as Muslim women, formerly restricted to their homes by tradition, are venturing into the public-sphere to pursue education and employment. Within a growing middle-class, women are exploring Islam, in part to religiously and socially position their education and employment in the faith structures of their communities. The institutions of patriarchal socio-religious marginalization and patron-client reciprocity are norms that require negotiation at home and in the workplace. Mission to and in Pakistan has published little that investigates the world of the modern, yet conservative, Muslim woman. Using recent scholarship on urban women and Islamism in Pakistan, plus personal observation and comments from interviews, this paper seeks to present women's own understandings of their place in society, and the ways in which they interpret their marginalization. It explores the value and the dangers of segregation as an education/employment strategy for women. The paper concludes that the traditional mission approach of Christian hospital/school has failed to reach the modern, middle-class Muslim woman. It has also failed to sensitively tackle the unequal distribution of power for women within institutions that give female subjugation religious legitimacy. Some suggestions are made for ways in which 21st century mission can engage the modern, Pakistani woman. The researcher has lived and worked in Pakistan for the past 35 years and for many years was the female director of a small Pakistan-based educational foundation.