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WEEKEND READ

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK: WOMEN AND LAND

Analysing women's rights to
inheritance in Pakistan

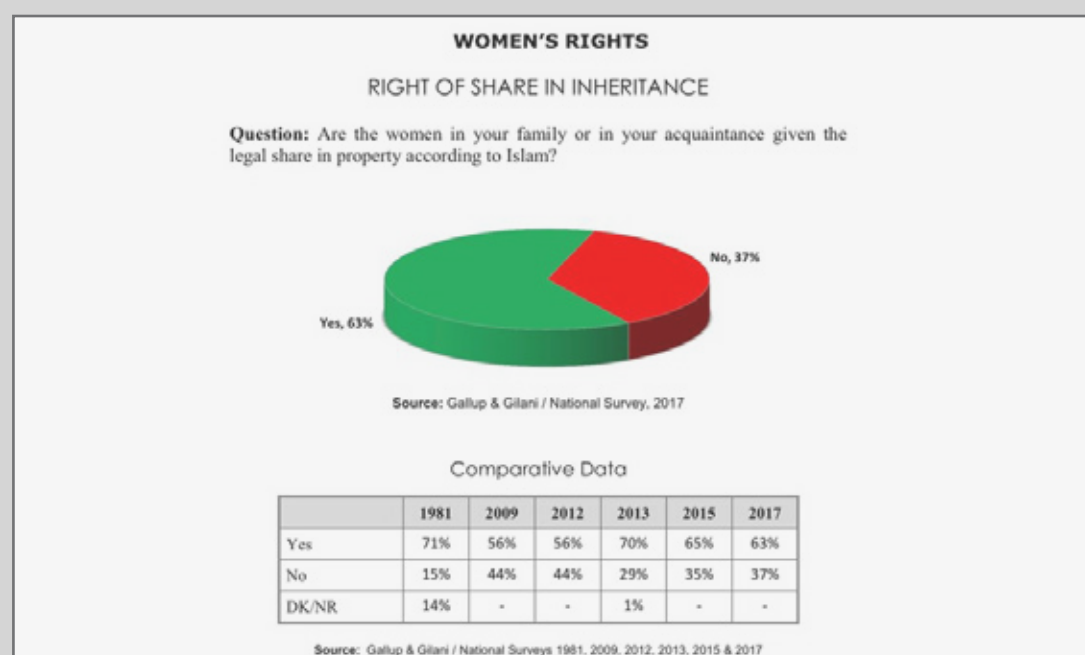
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In writing about attitudes towards women's rights to inherit in Lakki Marwat, Ahmad et al clearly identify the impact of inheritance in Pakistan's social context: this "transfer of wealth from old to young generations" provides "an important source of wealth to the young and middle aged" (197: 2012). In a myriad of ways, bequeathals of wealth – specifically property, with its consistent revaluation – provide heirs with a safety net in an economy increasingly proving to be uncertain. With cultural perceptions disallowing most women from pursuing paid work, inheritance becomes one of the simplest ways for women to attain financial freedom.

According to a 2010 survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan, 75% of Pakistani women can acquire their shares of familial inheritance (52: 2019). These statistics — made available as part of historical data on women under the Gallup History Project — suggest a large majority of Pakistani women are named heir to bequeathals of fortunes, indubitably including land and property, allowing them to build personal wealth by means of this transfer. Interestingly, however, 2012 saw just under 60% of Pakistanis admitting to endowing women in their families their "legal share" of property under Islamic jurisprudence. This widening gap suggests a trend under which a significant proportion of women are kept deprived of both their right to inherit property, and their right to inherit a certain percentage of endowments left behind – creating a situation of inequality in terms of women being allowed financial security.

While 2013 presented an eleven-point jump in inheritance laws being honoured — with nearly 70% of the population confirming women in their families are able to rightfully inherit — 2015 presents a slight dip, which then grows into a worrying trend. In 2017, figures dropped to 62%, with 38% of the population admitting women in their families are not given their legal shares in property according to Islam (Gallup & Gilani / National Surveys 2013, 2015 & 2017). While these dips and rises may be attributed to consistent and organic change where there are bound to be some differences between perceptions in 2010 and 2017, the consistent and dramatic eight-point increase between 2015 and 2017 — from 31% of the population admitting to depriving women of their legal right to inherit to 38% — indicates a tangible shift.

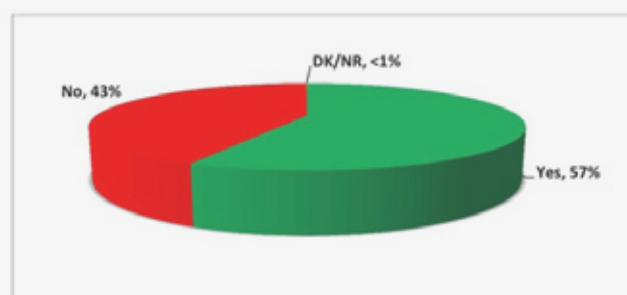
This becomes particularly telling in tandem with more generalised polls measuring citizens' feelings — not actions — with regard to women and land: there seems to be a general, growing consensus that women should not be involved in any matters pertaining to land, including buying, selling and transfers.



While a 2013 poll indicates 31% of the population believes women “should not be involved in land matters”, 2017 exhibits a sharp twelve-point increase, with 43% convinced women should not be active participants in matters of land. These numbers, particularly decisive because of the near-perfect 99% response rate, show an almost even split in perceptions — a far cry from the 70-30 split recorded in 2013. While it would be useful to have this data divided into gender and age groupings for further analysis, a general trend is apparent: there seems to be an increasing fixation on separating women from matters of land.

Interestingly, this regressive trend seems to have started developing at a time when conspicuous, discernible religiosity is highly popular. A 2016 survey (66: 2019) indicates 77% of the population believes that all Muslim women “should be forced” to don the hijab. More importantly, while both men and women consider religion a very important part of their lives (World Values Survey Wave 7), another Gallup Pakistan survey conducted in 2017 shows only 29% of local mosques offer designated prayer areas for women (67: 2019).

Question: Do you think women should be involved in land matters or not?



Source: Gallup & Gilani / National Survey, 2017

	2009	2012	2013	2015	2017
Yes	60%	64%	68%	61%	57%
No	39%	35%	31%	39%	43%
DK/NR	1%	1%	1%	1%	<1%

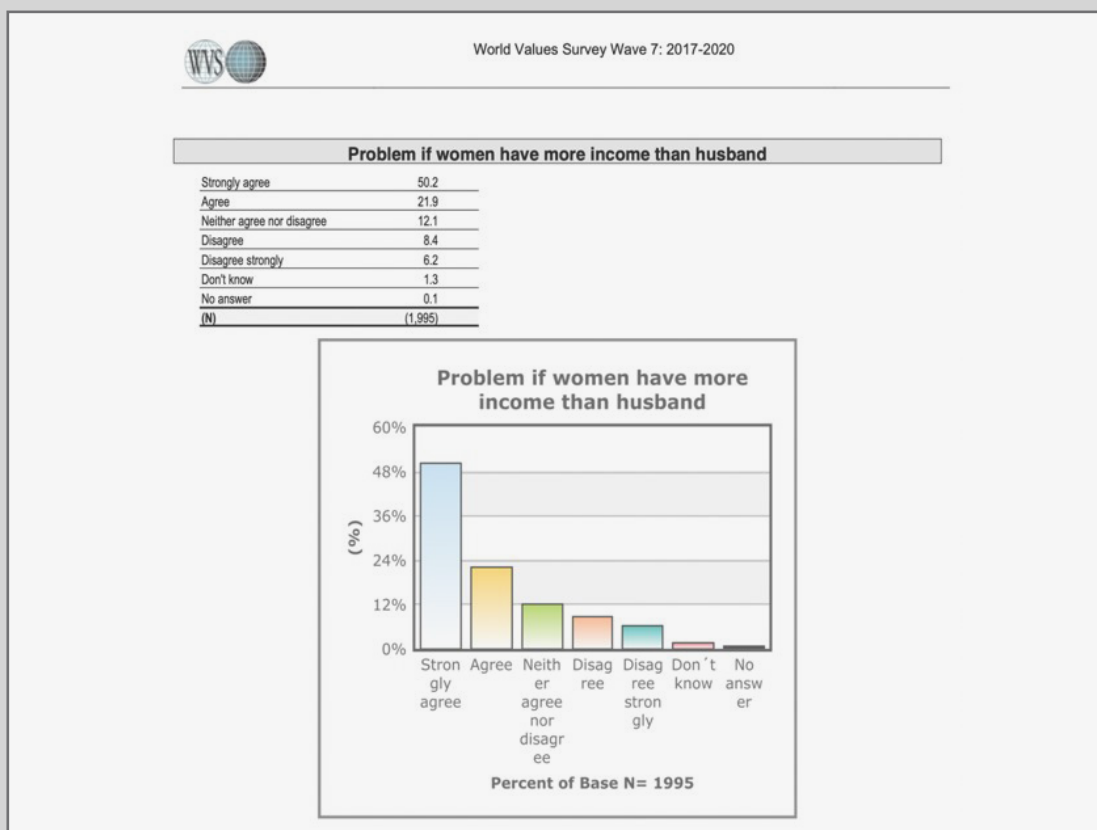
This indicates a growing desire to relegate women to the realm of the unseen — for them to physically be figures of religious piety while also being deprived of the rights afforded to them under basic Islamic law. In this vein, 2017 saw 52% of Pakistanis agree that while women are not “apparently involved” in matters of land, they are, in fact, “actually involved”. This presents a 16-point increase compared to 2013, suggesting the growing perception women actually do operate “behind the scenes” in a manner that seems covert — and, in context, somewhat insidious (Gallup & Gilani / National Surveys 2013 & 2017).

On a wider social level, perceptions about women are also changing, which is inextricably linked with altering views surrounding women and land. According to polls conducted in 2018, a majority of Pakistanis believe women are more “emotional” and less “principled” than men – categories which are seemingly abstract but have undoubted influence. Anger is also more readily attributed to women: comparative data suggests there has been a 15% increase in Pakistanis believing women are “traditionally” angrier than men; from 10% in 2013 to 25% in 2018 (Gallup & Gilani / National Survey 2018).

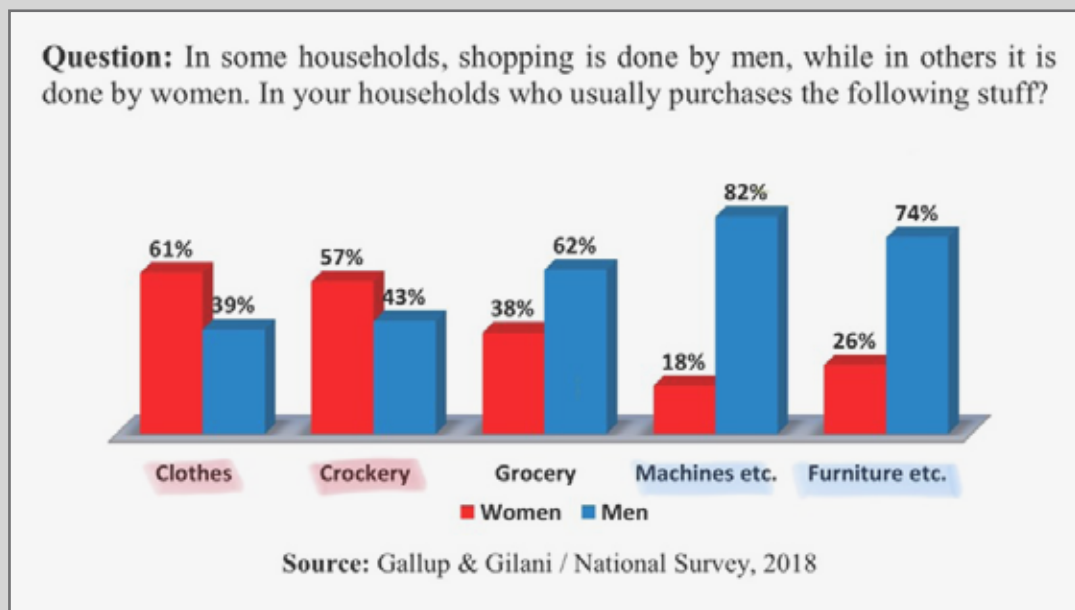
	TOTAL	Sex	
		Male	Female
Very important	89.6%	89.3%	89.9%
Rather important	7.0%	7.5%	6.5%
Not very important	1.8%	2.0%	1.5%
Not at all important	1.4%	0.8%	2.1%
Don't know	0.1%	0.2%	-
No answer	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%
(N)	(1,995)	(1,037)	(958)

Selected samples: Pakistan 2018

These changes in perception – and the development of this regressive trend – may also be attributed to the strides made by feminist movements in Pakistan within the last decade. With more women joining the workforce, there seems to be new, unwavering resistance to this step towards financial freedom under the guise of cultural propriety. A compilation of data under the World Values Survey suggests nearly 50% of the adult population strongly agrees there is a “problem” if women earn more than their husbands. The increasing occurrence of this phenomenon may also be linked to women viewed as inherently less “principled” and “angrier” than men. In the same vein, there exists a stronger perception women must exist as solely homemakers than careerists. A 2017 survey found 59% of the population believes women “should quit jobs and focus more on raising children” (27: 2019), demonstrating clearly deep-rooted cultural beliefs and newfound anxieties surrounding women’s increasing independence and financial freedom.



While these numbers remain objective when studied in isolation, in context they become indicative of a wider, far-reaching change in how women are perceived and treated. While it may not entirely be possible to establish causative links between this data, it is interesting to note the extent to which women are relegated to the unseen in terms of large financial decisions. While 84% of Pakistanis admit solely women in their families cook, clean and manage households (Gallup & Gilani / National Survey, 2017), for example, larger purchases – such as those of machines and furniture – are authorised solely by men (Gallup & Gilani / National Survey, 2018: 2019). In this context, land and land matters become metaphors for the financial power and independence of which women are dispossessed at a time where general attitudes surrounding their inherent character are also altering at rapid paces.



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