



Pakistan Journal of History and Civilization

Women in the Freedom Struggle of South Asia: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article synthesizes a century of scholarship on women's participation in South Asia's freedom struggles—from early reformist mobilizations in the late nineteenth century to mass civil disobedience, clandestine networks, and post-war constitutional settlements in the 1940s. It situates women's activism within overlapping arenas: associational life (women's conferences, social-reform leagues, student bodies), mass movements (boycott, picketing, marches), underground and militant activity (revolutionary cells, intelligence, the Indian National Army's Rani of Jhansi Regiment), welfare and relief work (prisoner aid, refugee care), and knowledge production (schools, journals, literary intervention). Drawing on comparative cases from present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, we show how respectability politics, household-public negotiations, caste/community hierarchies, and transnational feminist networks structured opportunity and constraint. We argue that women's political labor changed repertoires of protest, broadened claims to citizenship, and left complex legacies—emancipatory in opening new publics, yet ambivalent in how

Keywords:

South Asia, anti-colonial nationalism, women's movements, civil disobedience, associational politics, revolutionary networks, suffrage, Partition

domesticity and communal boundary-making re-inscribed limits. The article closes by mapping research gaps on provincial archives, vernacular periodicals, police/prosecution files, and oral histories needed to write more inclusive regional histories.

INTRODUCTION

The history of South Asia’s freedom struggle has long emphasized elite leaders, constitutional negotiations, and mass movements. Over the past four decades, gendered histories have reframed this story by asking how women entered politics, what kinds of work they performed, and how social hierarchies shaped both visibility and vulnerability. Early reformist currents—educational experiments, print activism, and debates on widow-remarriage and purdah—created repertoires that later anti-colonial movements would adapt. Muslim women’s organizations (e.g., the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam) and cross-community platforms like the All-India Women’s Conference professionalized associational skills and made the “women’s question” a matter of public policy.

During the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements (1920s–30s), women organized pickets at liquor/foreign cloth shops, ran neighborhood committees, and acted as couriers and fund-raisers; notable figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Begum Rokeya became icons, while thousands of lesser-known women sustained the everyday infrastructure of protest. Revolutionary circuits—from Bengal’s clandestine cells to the INA’s Rani of Jhansi Regiment—enlisted women in intelligence, shelter networks, and symbolic roles that challenged colonial masculinities and indigenous patriarchies alike. In Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), suffrage campaigns and labor-linked activism drew middle-class women into coalition politics; in Punjab and Bengal, Muslim League women such as Jahanara Shah Nawaz and Ra’ana Liaquat Ali Khan developed a distinct associational field that fed into Pakistan’s founding politics.

The 1940s brought intensified repression, wartime scarcity, famine, and finally Partition—processes that both expanded women’s crisis leadership (relief, rehabilitation, refugee transport, and negotiation with police/army) and exposed them to communal violence. After independence (1947–48), new constitutions extended formal citizenship and suffrage, but the institutional memory of women’s freedom-era labor was unevenly integrated into state structures. This essay takes a comparative approach to these trajectories, identifying patterns across regions and pointing to sources that can deepen the archive.

Intellectual Genealogies & Early Reform (c. 1850–1910)

The mid-nineteenth century marked the intellectual foundations of women’s political subjectivity in South Asia. Reformers and early women writers grappled with questions of **education, seclusion (purdah), widow-remarriage, and domestic science**, establishing the key themes that would shape later nationalist participation. Debates in Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, and English-language journals became critical arenas where reformist men and emerging female voices contested the meaning of progress, morality, and respectability.

Print debates were central. Journals such as *Tahzib un-Niswan* and *Bamabodhini Patrika* published essays on women’s schooling, balancing modern curricula with religious and cultural propriety. The question of widow-remarriage was fiercely debated, with reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championing legislation in colonial Bengal, while conservative factions

defended orthodox codes. Domestic science, often promoted by missionary schools, was reframed as both modern and rooted in indigenous traditions.

Women's essays and memoirs provided laboratories of political voice. Writers such as Pandita Ramabai (*The High-Caste Hindu Woman*), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (*Sultana's Dream*), and Begum of Bhopal's memoirs challenged not only patriarchy but also colonial paternalism. These writings blurred personal narrative and public argument, creating space for women to theorize social change from within the idiom of everyday life.

Importantly, **Muslim, Hindu, and Christian reform currents** engaged in both convergence and divergence. Christian missionary education for girls often clashed with Hindu and Muslim guardianship concerns, yet all traditions engaged with the question of women's literacy as a marker of communal advancement. Muslim social reformers such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the founders of women's journals in Aligarh framed female education as essential for civilizational progress, though bounded by respectability and seclusion. Hindu reformers of the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj linked women's uplift with critiques of child marriage and the defense of widow-remarriage, while also emphasizing the role of mothers in nurturing patriotic sons. Across religious divides, respectability (*izzat*, *maryada*) functioned as a **common regulatory principle**, enabling women's entry into public debate while policing the limits of their autonomy.

This early reform era thus laid the **genealogical foundations** of women's participation in the freedom struggle: print culture, educational reform, and the redefinition of domesticity as public duty created the scaffolding for later mobilizations in nationalist, revolutionary, and associational contexts.

Associations, Schools, and Vernacular Publics (1910–1930)

The second decade of the twentieth century witnessed a **new associational culture** that brought women into sustained organizational life. The **growth of women's conferences, student bodies, and philanthropic leagues** transformed what had once been scattered reformist initiatives into recognizable platforms of collective action. The All-India Women's Conference (AIWC, est. 1927), Muslim women's leagues in Punjab and Bengal, and numerous provincial student associations became crucial training grounds. Here, women developed political craft through practices often overlooked by conventional histories: **fundraising campaigns, record-keeping, drafting minutes, and running correspondence networks**. These seemingly routine activities institutionalized women's voices in the procedural fabric of political life.

Vernacular journals multiplied during this period, with Urdu (*Ismat*, *Tahzib un-Niswan*), Bengali (*Bamabodhini Patrika*), Tamil (*Pen Kalvi*), and Sinhala women's magazines becoming platforms for **policy critique and community reform debates**. These periodicals not only reported on conferences but also serialized essays on child marriage, property rights, suffrage, and temperance. The use of local languages widened access beyond the elite English-educated minority, linking grassroots female readerships to emerging feminist discourses. They also forged inter-regional solidarities, with women citing one another's writings across linguistic boundaries.

Participation, however, remained **negotiated within the household**. To attend conferences or student meetings, women often required paternal, spousal, or familial consent. Travel—whether by train to provincial gatherings or by carriage to neighborhood associations—was subject to scrutiny under norms of *purdah* and respectability. Many women devised strategies:

attending meetings accompanied by relatives, presenting political participation as an extension of domestic duty, or framing activism as philanthropic “service” rather than rebellion. This tension between **household authority and public participation** shaped the terms of early women’s politics, ensuring that activism was simultaneously empowering and circumscribed.

In sum, the associational world of 1910–1930 functioned as a **political apprenticeship**, equipping women with organizational literacy, public speaking confidence, and networks that would later be mobilized in civil disobedience and mass nationalist struggles.

Mass Politics & Civil Disobedience (1930–1934; 1942)

By the early 1930s, women’s activism in South Asia had moved from associational platforms to the **frontlines of nationalist mass politics**. The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) and the Quit India Movement (1942) mobilized thousands of women in boycotts, marches, and neighborhood organizations, reshaping the political landscape.

Boycott and picketing were crucial tactics. Women stood outside liquor shops and stalls selling foreign cloth, urging buyers to abstain in favor of swadeshi (indigenous) goods. This strategy linked domestic ideals of purity and household economy to nationalist demands, giving women a culturally legitimate role in public protest. In many cities, **neighborhood committees** were led by women who collected donations, distributed khadi, and organized local satyagraha logistics, such as food and shelter for demonstrators. These activities blurred the boundary between household management and civic mobilization.

The **experience of imprisonment** marked a turning point. Prominent leaders such as Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay were arrested, but so too were thousands of lesser-known women from small towns and villages. Their **prison diaries and memoirs** documented not only the political resolve of incarceration but also its gendered dimensions: surveillance, denial of domestic amenities, and the stigma attached to women leaving their families for jail. These accounts expanded the repertoire of nationalist writing, giving voice to an embodied politics of suffering and resilience.

Yet, the movement also exposed **tensions between Gandhian ideals of domesticity and emergent feminist claims to autonomy**. Gandhi celebrated women as symbols of sacrifice, moral purity, and ahimsa (non-violence), envisioning their political role as an extension of their nurturing duties. Feminist activists, however, increasingly demanded recognition of women as autonomous citizens, not merely as moral guardians of the nation. This tension surfaced in debates within the AIWC and in correspondence between Gandhi and female leaders who sought a broader agenda that included suffrage, property rights, and legal reforms.

The Quit India Movement of 1942 amplified these dynamics. With many male leaders imprisoned, women such as Aruna Asaf Ali and Usha Mehta took command, organizing underground radio broadcasts, distributing leaflets, and coordinating resistance. Here, the line between symbolic participation and direct leadership was decisively crossed. Women not only upheld Gandhian ideals but also carved out spaces of independent political authority, leaving a legacy that continued into post-independence debates on rights and representation.

Clandestine, Militant, and Wartime Roles

Alongside civil disobedience and associational politics, many women were drawn into **clandestine and militant networks** that challenged both colonial authority and patriarchal expectations. In Bengal, Punjab, and Bombay, revolutionary circuits relied on women for

shelter, intelligence gathering, and message transmission. While men often dominated public leadership, women's homes became safehouses, their mobility shielded clandestine correspondence, and their social invisibility in some contexts allowed them to evade suspicion. Figures like **Pritilata Waddedar** and **Kalpna Dutt** stand out—Waddedar famously led the 1932 attack on the Pahartali European Club in Chittagong, and Dutt played a critical role in revolutionary planning, later recording her experiences in prison memoirs that provide rare first-hand accounts of women's militant activism.

The wartime context of the 1940s expanded these roles. Subhas Chandra Bose's **Indian National Army (INA)** created the **Rani of Jhansi Regiment**, an all-women combat unit named after the legendary 1857 rebel queen Lakshmibai. While the regiment's battlefield impact was limited, its **symbolic significance was profound**: it presented the militarization of womanhood as a nationalist ideal, mobilizing imagery of courage and sacrifice that resonated across South Asia. For many recruits, the regiment was a radical departure from normative domestic roles, affirming women as not just supporters but direct agents of armed struggle.

Yet, women's involvement in militancy raised enduring **ethical and historiographical dilemmas**. Nationalist narratives often celebrated militant women as heroic exceptions, while Gandhian circles viewed violence as antithetical to women's "natural" roles as nurturers. Historians continue to debate whether women's participation in revolutionary violence subverted or reinforced gender hierarchies. Some argue that such involvement validated women as full political actors, while others suggest it was instrumentalized within a patriarchal-nationalist framework that ultimately restored traditional boundaries after independence.

These clandestine and wartime roles thus illustrate both the **breadth of women's political repertoires** and the contested meanings of their activism. They expanded the symbolic horizon of nationalism, but also left unresolved questions about the relationship between gender, violence, and citizenship in South Asia's freedom struggles.

Partition, Citizenship, and Afterlives (1945–1950)

The final phase of the freedom struggle in South Asia was overshadowed by **Partition's violence and displacement**, which placed women at the center of relief and rehabilitation. As millions were uprooted across the new borders of India and Pakistan, women assumed roles as **rescuers, mediators, and caregivers**. Many joined relief committees, staffed refugee camps, and negotiated directly with police and militia to secure safe passage for abducted or stranded women. Their presence was critical in humanitarian corridors, yet it also exposed them to traumatic experiences of communal violence, abduction, and sexual assault, making women both **agents of relief and targets of violence**.

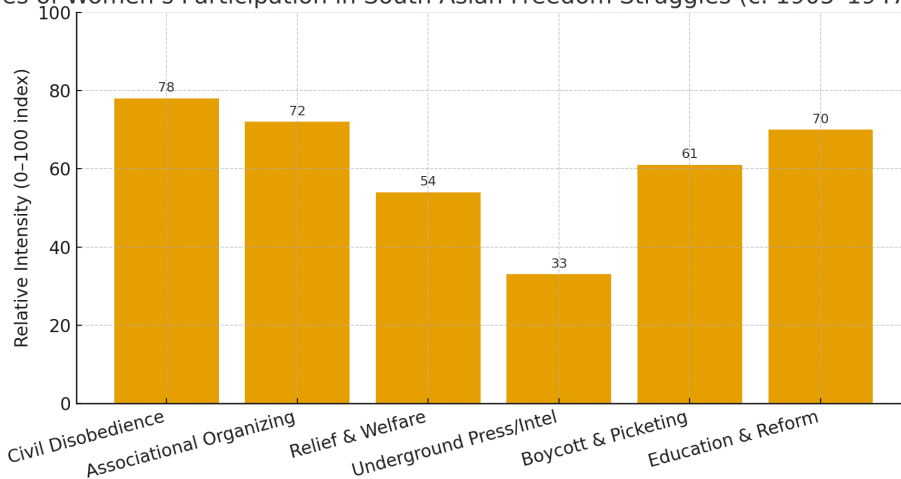
In the **constituent assemblies** of the new states, women demanded recognition not just as victims but as **citizens**. Leaders such as Hansa Mehta and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur in India, and Jahanara Shahnawaz and Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan in Pakistan, argued for universal suffrage and equal legal rights. Their advocacy secured women's franchise in both constitutions, but the broader feminist agenda often yielded to party priorities. Women's wings of major political parties mobilized members for welfare and propaganda, but structural barriers limited their influence in policymaking.

The **afterlives of Partition** left complex legacies. For many, the memory of relief work and survival became **silenced within domestic life**, subsumed under national narratives that celebrated independence but muted women's suffering. Oral histories reveal the tension between public commemoration and private trauma, where gendered violence was often left

unspoken. At the same time, the institutionalization of gender equality in law remained **uneven**. Constitutional guarantees of equality and suffrage did not automatically translate into everyday rights: personal law systems, patriarchal party structures, and communal politics constrained the transformative potential of women’s freedom-struggle activism.

Thus, the period of 1945–1950 marked both the **culmination and the curtailment** of women’s political agency. Women were visible as rescuers, negotiators, and legislators, but their contributions were quickly overshadowed by nationalist state-building projects. The memory of their work persists unevenly—in memoirs, oral histories, and family narratives—challenging historians to recover these afterlives and reframe South Asia’s transition to independence through the lens of women’s citizenship.

Modalities of Women’s Participation in South Asian Freedom Struggles (c. 1905–1947) — Illustrative



Summary

Women’s participation in South Asia’s freedom struggles cannot be reduced to a single script of heroic leadership. It was infrastructural and distributed—thousands kept books, edited newsletters, hid fugitives, picketed shops, and ran kitchens for satyagrahis. Associational skills developed in schools, welfare societies, and literary circles migrated into mass movements and clandestine operations, reconfiguring what counted as “politics.”

At the same time, the very languages that enabled entry—respectability, domestic duty, communal guardianship—often circumscribed autonomy. The post-colonial settlement incorporated women as citizens and voters, but the institutional memory of their labor remained partial. Future research must dig into provincial archives, police/prosecution records, vernacular periodicals, and oral histories—especially of Muslim, Dalit, adivasi, and working-class women—to write a more inclusive regional history.

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