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Transmitting religious values through online religious communities: case study of Pakistani Shia mothers' home education

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to understand what specific religious values are being transmitted to children through online Shia religious communities during the pandemic. Twenty-seven mothers were sampled from three cities of Pakistan. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide and analysed using thematic content analysis. Eleven themes were found, under two broad categories of: (a) Transmitting beliefs and influencing religious practice and (b) Developing community orientation. Perceived as a coping and support mechanism during COVID-19, findings reveal that Shia mothers are dependent on the online religious community for the transmission of sectarian values and also wider community morals in their children. This study also implies the preference for online religious services beyond the pandemic, mainly due to the convenience of home-based participation, privacy, and consumerism.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has brought with it novel challenges of social distancing, uncertainty, and loss of life; resulting in people turning to religion to find meaning in altered life circumstances (Hammond 2020). Though online religious activities are not new (Meza 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a major transfer to online activities across the religions of the world (Wildman et al. 2020). Since the pandemic, there has been very little research about the role of online religious communities (ORC) and the impact they may be bring in people's lives (Kühle and Larsen 2021). There is also a need for contemporary research on the influence of ORCs on the transmission of religious values in children (Fernandes et al. 2020), which this study aims to investigate.

The Shias of the world comprise the second largest Islamic sectarian majority, estimated at 320 million people (Grim and Hsu 2011). Sub-sects within the Shia community include the Ismailis, Zaydis, Alevis and Alawites; however the Twelver Shias are the majority sub-sect at 85%. Also known as the *Fiqa-e-Jaffriya* sect, the Twelver Shias follow the traditions and jurisprudence of the twelve descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon

him), starting from Hazrat[1] Fatima to Imam[2] Mahdi.[3] Despite sub-sect diversity, all Shia groups have the common characteristics of foremost loyalty to the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) martyred family, known as the *Ahlebait*[4] (Szanto 2018).

Child socialisation and intergenerational transmission of values

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory looks at a child's development within the context of family, community, and the societal environment (Darling 2007). The main premise is that child development is influenced by multiple agents from the immediate and larger environment, starting from the home and parents. Attachment theory contributes to the idea that the values and beliefs of significant others, like parents, have a strong impact on behaviour and practices of children (De Roos 2006). The more attached a child is to a parent and the more activities they participate in together, the more likely it is that the child's attitudes and practices will be influenced. Recent theorists have also revisited social learning theory to describe how children learn attitudes and behavioural practices from their parents and primary caregivers (Edinyang 2016).

Religious socialisation and the religious community

Glock and Stock have theorised about the multidimensional concept of religion, concluding that commitment to religious ideology in youth is dependent on the transmission process within the home (Clayton and Gladden 1974). Longitudinal scholarship contributes to the transmission of religious values in youth, is influenced by religious upbringing at home, homogeneity in belief of both parents, beliefs of grandparents, and schooling and religious education (Tervo-Niemelä 2020). Overall, research from both the past (De Hart 1990; Azmitia et al. 1996; Bandura 1969) and recent years (Jacobs et al. 2012; Stearns and Mckinney 2019; Aguayo et al. 2021) highlights how strong religious commitment in parents is a prominent influence on transmission of religious values in children. Some recent scholarship even suggests that parental influence is one of the strongest predictors of religious beliefs (Cheah, Gürsoy, and Balkaya-Ince 2021; Upenieks, Andersson, and Schafer 2021). Other research contributes that the more connected parents remain with the religious community, the more the transmission of religious values in a child are influenced (Durkheim and Swain 2008; Smith 2020; Aran and Nayebkabir 2018; Pusztai 2005).

Some research highlights that mothers are more influential in ensuring children participate in activities at the religious centres (Francis 1993; Hayes and Pittelkow 1993; Acock and Bengtson 1980; Milevsky, Szuchman, and Milevsky 2008) and that mothers assume more responsibility for monitoring attendance of children at the religious centre (Halgunseth et al. 2016; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). Additionally, women are known to turn to religion in order to provide support and protection for their family in times of uncertainty (Kleinman 2007). In the context of this study, it is derived that mothers, as primary socialising agents, can provide vital information with respect to child participation with the ORC during the pandemic.

Religious meaning-making, social capital and consumerism

Religion has been used as an effective strategy for meaning-making and also management of stress, with respect to both coping and making sense of hardship and loss (Hall et al. 2018; Park 2005). In times of upheaval and crises parents with strong religious beliefs worry that their children may become disconnected from their religion (Merino 2014), especially if they comprise a religious minority (Çetrez 2015). Recently, scholars have also explored the role of religion as a coping strategy during the coronavirus pandemic (Thomas and Barbato 2020; Counted et al. 2020), along with the possibility of religious values promoting preventive health behaviour (Dein et al. 2020; Tan, Musa, and Su 2021) and providing social support or informal counselling (Coppola et al. 2021).

The role of religious communities in transmission of values is also significant because of the opportunity for social networking (Muller and Ellison 2001). The channelling hypothesis suggests that parental influence on transmission of religious values to children is mediated by the religious congregation (Martin, White, and Perlman 2003). Overall, many parents believe that social ties with the religious sect can become protective structures for their children (Kuusisto 2010; Poulter et al. 2017), make them more aware of human rights and tolerance (Poulter et al. 2017), and promote social welfare and community solidarity (Pagano et al. 2003). Scholars have also attempted to understand the interplay between religion and digital technologies (Hoover 2006; Kong 2001; Campbell 2017). When religious communities have transferred online, it has contributed to social sustainability and communication of information, not just related to religion, but also to rational debate about contemporary political and health issues (Tudor, Filimon Benea, and Bratosin 2021). Campbell has discussed the impact of religious practice online, also referred to as 'networked religion', on the sustenance of religious beliefs and values in the modern world (Campbell 2012).

Study aim

This study aims to understand what specific religious values Shia mothers hope to maintain and believe are being instilled in their children through affiliation with ORCs during the pandemic. It is important to try and understand what religious values and beliefs are being transmitted to the youth in contemporary times (Dobbelaere 2009). Relatively little research has been carried out regarding the transmission of values related to religion (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019) and no research at all has been done in this area with respect to the Twelver Shias sect. Themes identified in this study are possibly the religious values which hold the most importance to the Twelver Shia community in times of crises. Furthermore, findings of this study may imply influence on practices within Pakistani society, as the Shias comprise 70 million of the Pakistani population (Malik 2002). This research will also contribute to shedding light on the role of ORCs in transferring traditional religious beliefs in Shia youth. Finally, this research will serve as an impetus for other researchers to investigate the role of ORCs amongst other religious sects of the world.

Methods

This cross-sectional qualitative study is based on a wider research project to understand the lived experiences and practices of Shias in Pakistan. Ethics approval for this study has been taken from the Institutional Review Board, Forman Christian College University. Informed

consent and permission for participation in this study, and recording of interviews, were obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants has been secured and no incentives were provided for participation. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants, in the findings section, in order to protect the identity of the interviewees

Participants

The participants were sampled purposely through the assistance of three Shia religious centres in Pakistan, which manage Whatsapp groups for their congregants and are using Zoom, YouTube and Facebook for communication. One religious centre from three cities of Pakistan was sampled each, including: Islamabad (Federal capital of Pakistan), Karachi (provincial capital of Sindh), and Lahore (provincial capital of Punjab). The three sampled religious centres are providing the following online services: (i) Live streaming or recording of sermons or *Majalis*, (ii) Study groups or classes for Quranic instruction and interpretation, Islamic jurisprudence, and *Hadees* (Prophet's traditions), (iii) Coordination for charity and donations, and (iv) Classes, activities, and competitions for children, ages 5 to 18 years, related to Quran, Prophets Stories, and Islamic history.

One female administrator from each religious centre was contacted to provide the contacts of their women followers from their Whatsapp list. Every second women from the list was contacted to avoid selection bias, and the aim was to sample 10 women from each religious centre to achieve a target sample of 30 mothers. The women in the final sample of this study are all currently married and between the ages of 27–41 years. They all have either an undergraduate or a master's degree. The participants have 1 to 4 children, of age groups between 03 to 17 years.

Data collection

Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to gather data during semi-lockdown and social distancing recommendation by the government (Farooq and De Villiers 2017). A suitable time for the interview call was requested and verbal consent was recorded (Cachia and Millward 2011). The data were collected over a period of two months, from November to December 2020. Thirty women participants were contacted and a final 27 women were interviewed and included in the analysis. Each participant was interviewed either once or twice, in calls that lasted between 25 minutes to 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English and audio-recording and notes were taken by the author and two research assistants. The research assistants were MPhil students with experience in data collection; and they were trained about study objectives over a period of three days. The semi-structured interview guide and probes for the study have been attached in **Appendix A**. The main research questions included: (i) What are the perceived reasons that compel mothers to keep their child/children affiliated with the religious centre? and (ii) What are the hopes and experiences of mothers with regard to transmission of religious values in children through participation with the online religious community?

Data analysis

A qualitative thematic content analysis approach was used for data analysis (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove 2019). Codes were identified by the author after listening to audio recordings and reading transcripts multiple times (Braun et al. 2018). The initial codes were then compared and further classified under broader codes according to similarity. All extra information not related to the study research question has been excluded. The data were analysed simultaneously as the interviews were conducted, and saturation point was reached by the twenty-first interview (Fusch and Ness 2015). Six more interviews were completed to confirm findings.

Trustworthiness of data

Transcripts of the audio recordings were transferred verbatim to Microsoft Word by one of the research assistants and then reviewed and checked by the second research assistant and the author (Shenton 2004). All participants of the study have minimum undergraduate degrees and are fluent in the English language; as English is the official working and study language of Pakistan. Women participants were able to contribute critically to the study area and what they hoped to gain through online sectarian affiliation with regard to transmission of religious values in children, adding to the reliability of the data. Peer check was used to ensure that no researcher bias or participant bias was part of theme generation by emailing data and findings to two colleagues who are experienced researchers (Connelly 2016). After confirmation of themes by peer check, the member check method was used to establish reliability and accuracy by sharing the themes with the participants of the study (Marshall and Rossman 2014). Each participant was sent the list of final themes by Whatsapp and asked whether findings were consistent with their beliefs and experiences. In addition, final themes were also shared with two Shia mothers who were affiliated with ORCs, but had not participated in the study. Both of these groups confirmed the final findings of this study.

Findings

Transmitting beliefs and influencing religious practice

Seeking intercession during the pandemic through congregational prayer

Nearly all the participants (n = 26) explained that ORCs afforded opportunity for their children to learn the importance of seeking intercession from the *Ahlebait* for fulfilment of prayers. Online affiliation during the pandemic was considered important to guide children that whenever they faced hardships and fragmentation in life, prayer was the best resort for stability and salvation. Mariam claimed:

> We have learnt from our elders to pray collectively at the end of a *Majalis* . . . as Hazrat Fatima (peace be upon her) attends (*Majalis*) and when she says *Ameen* (Amen), then all prayers are answered. It is this that our children must remember . . . not just for now, but for the future as well.

Benefiting from online sectarian consumerism

Many participants (n = 24) shared that a major advantage of ORCs was that it provided children with the benefits of sectarian consumerism. Women described how children have less time and interest in remaining connected to online activities, unless it suits their school routine and individual preferences. ORCs offer the youth, and the family, efficiency and control, with participants describing the advantages of being able to choose the: (i) religious scholar, (ii) topic of sermon or activity, (iii) language, (iv) time bracket, and (iv) activities for participation, like Quran interpretation, *Hadees* Studies, Prophet's stories, and competitions. Farwa shared:

> We (mother and children) are finally free by 7pm from online school and homework. We usually watch a sermon together for an hour . . . the children choose the topic they wish to learn more about. Life is so difficult . . . there is no time for anything. I think that even after the pandemic ends, we might use the online services . . . if they (online religious services) continue like this.

Influencing cultural habits

Majority women participants (n = 21) described their belief that remaining attached to the ORC, would secure and sustain cultural habits and conduct in children which were acceptable to the sect. Mothers shared that they felt accountable about their children's steadfastness to religiously approved dressing, speech, and behaviour. They described their fear that children would be influenced by different agents that did not follow acceptable cultural codes inherent to the sect, such as social media, TV shows, school friends and relatives. In this way, mothers wanted uninterrupted connection with the ORCs during the pandemic, to influence a consistent transmission in children for cultural habits. Three mothers stated that they considered it their primary responsibility in life to develop cultural habits in children that the *Ahlebait* approved of. Hajra declared:

> I am answerable to my grandparents, parents and the *Ahlebait* in the next life about my children's behavior, dressing and speech.

Participants also described how the ORCs helped their children to remember key cultural habits associated with the sect, like important anniversaries of the Prophet's (peace be upon them) and the *Ahlebait* (including birth and death anniversaries), and specific dates for special prayers and worship. Women revealed that online viewership and participation in the sermons, Quran classes, and different religious activities for children helped in maintaining cultural habits related to speech conduct, dressing, and general norms for social interaction inherent in Islamic beliefs and Shia sectarian codes of conduct. Nargis shared:

> During online *Majalis* and in Zoom meetings my daughters can see and hear the *Zakira* (female religious scholar) and other female members of the community . . . they are learning and gaining confidence about what is culturally acceptable for us . . . especially with regard to modesty in clothes and speech.

Escaping sectarian violence and adopting partial Taqaiyya

Women participants (n = 12) shared that ORCs were a safe way to retain sectarian roots, while avoiding violence and abuse. Participants shared that the systematic persecution and violence against Shias was a significant reality in their lives. Women feared harm and

random instances of violence against their children, especially during visits to mosques and religious centres, or in participation in public processions. Women discussed the concept of *Taqaiyya*- which is the permission to hide religious identity or the practice of religion behind closed doors to avoid persecution. ORCs were likened to 'partial *Taqaiyya*' in that they protected the community from possible violence, and also protected them from contracting the coronavirus. Amna elaborated:

> Our children are now able to safely observe *Azadari* within the homes, rather than becoming targets for sectarian abuse, or even killing, God-forbid! Our *Imams* have allowed us *Taqaiyya* (hiding of faith in public) when our lives are at risk.

Separation from singular ritualisation

Many participants (n = 12) shared that they preferred to disassociate themselves and their children with singular ritualisation and instead focus on religious activities that promote Islamic principles and history. Women also believed that separation from singular ritualisation would keep their children associated with Islamic values and practices and prevent abandonment of sect. Singular ritualisation was described by participants as chest or head beating, poetic lamentations, loud wailing, and kissing or tying of threads to replicas and symbols. Participants described how ORCs focused on sermon delivery, Islamic studies, and Q&A sessions for the youth; and that rituals were either excluded all together in online activities or at the most a few minutes were spent on poetic lamentation. Two women participants argued strongly that wailing and beating did not help them or their children, and nor was it advised by the *Ahlebait*. Zakia explained:

> When we visited the center most of the time was taken up by rituals, like kissing replicas and chest beating. Separation from too many rituals is necessary to help our youth to stay affiliated with the sect.

Meaning-making for sickness through religious role models

Participants (n = 10) highlighted the importance of deriving values from the lives of the Prophet's and *Ahlebait* who were known for displaying courage and integrity in sickness. The health crises made it even more important for participants that their children gain knowledge about how sickness had influenced the lives of notable Prophets and their descendants, and how they overcome ill-health and adversity with prayer and patience. Participants mentioned the following names of religious role models who were discussed in sermons or group studies: (i) Prophet's – Hazrat Ilyas (Prophet Elisha), Hazrat Ayub (Prophet Job), and Hazrat Yunus (Prophet Jonah) (peace be upon them), and (ii) the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) grandson and granddaughters—listed as Imam Zain ul Abedin, Bibi Sharifa, and Bibi Sughra. Women also described how fears and uncertainty of the pandemic were abated, in themselves and their children, by remembering the strength and virtues of religious role models who battled illness for many years. Fizza explained:

> Our children are reminded that even our Prophets faced challenges and tests of sickness and hardship . . . and that we will get through this (the pandemic).

Developing community orientation

Gaining social power and building a network

Most participants (n = 24) shared their conviction that keeping their children connected to the ORCs helped to build social power and networking for the next generation. Mothers spoke of how they too, as children, had made lifelong friends when they visited the religious centre with their parents and how this had helped them to remain connected with their sectarian beliefs. Some women participants further illuminated the concept of 'gaining social power' through ORCs as a protection against the monotony of lockdown and addiction to online games and TV shows in children. Participation in ORCs helped to create a balance by instilling religious values in children's lives and providing them the opportunity to develop a social capital of lifelong friends from within their sect. Two mothers also shared their belief that this network was important for future arrangement of marriages, maintenance of joint family traditions, and care for elders within the family unit. Abida elaborated:

> It is important for our children to make friends within the sect through the (religious) center . . . as they don't find many friends from their own sect through school. My closest friends are from the *Imambargah* (religious center) I used to visit and spend long hours at as a child. These are the friends that support us in recalling our (sectarian) values and beliefs through life.

Instilling charity ethics through convenient online transfers

Majority participants (n = 18) shared that during the pandemic it had become more important to instil in children the ethic of charity to support the disprivileged impacted by the pandemic, and also to repel hardships. Mothers wanted their children to develop ethics to support the poor through *Sadaqat* (voluntary charity) and *Zakat* (religious taxes). The ORCs facilitate families in providing information about legitimate and needy parties, account details for online transfer, and clarification about tax calculations. Regular information is provided at the beginning and the end of the *Majalis* and in messages on Whatsapp. Women explained that children were learning charity ethics from ORCs by: (i) helping to note down online accounts, (ii) choosing where to transfer funds, (iii) contributing their own pocket money, and (iv) reminding parents about regular donations. Ruqaiya described:

> In these times (pandemic) we need to give *Sadaqat* daily to alleviate our own troubles and ease the difficulties of the poor and needy. I want my children to learn these values of charity-giving . . . .and for this (charity-giving) to remain a part of their lives.

Women also shared that they wanted their children to be facilitated in retaining religious ethics for charity-giving through convenient online transfers, as this would be the most convenient method in the future and would support uninterrupted charity during busy schedules and hectic lives. Samirah explained:

> It is best that our children follow the online information provided by the religious center about tax calculations and the most deserving charities . . . online transfers are convenient and will prevent delays in submitting mandatory *Zakat* (religious taxes).

Staying updated in Ijtihad in a changing world

Significant participants (n = 18) shared that they depended on online sermons during the pandemic to keep their children updated on the developments of *Ijtihad-* the process of critical thinking by religious scholars to arrive at relevant legal conclusions for Islamic laws. Participants believed that having awareness of evolving religious rights and the concept of *Ijtihad* was consequential for retaining affiliation in children. Women explained that even though some of their children were too young to understand complicated Islamic laws, they wanted them to recognise early on that Islam was a religion for contemporary times with allowances for development in rights and laws. Women also shared that accessing updated conclusions from *Ijtihad* by legitimate religious scholars during the pandemic was easier online. Answers pertaining to Islamic law, arising from the pandemic, which children were able to benefit from were listed as: (i) whether it was mandatory to attend congregational prayer and *Majalis* in person, (ii) should congregational *Azadari* (commemoration) processions be held in the streets during the pandemic, and (iii) if mosques should be kept open for the public during the pandemic? Aliya shared:

> Our *Zakira* (religious scholar) has kept us updated about the differences in opinions and conclusions through *Ijtihad* about congregational attendance. The children now understand that *Azadari* can be done from the home as well ... and there is no compulsion in religion.

Reaffirming eschatological beliefs that promote community role

Majority participants (n = 15) stressed on the need to remind their children of the eschatological beliefs for the afterlife which promote positive community roles in this life. The religious identity of Shias was explained to include the eschatological belief that *Imam Mahdi* and Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him) will return to bring justice to the world and that pious believers can become members of this revolution, even after death, by practicing justice and piety. Insecurity of life due to the pandemic particularly made mothers feel strongly about teaching children about what would help them gain rewards in the next life and what will help families to be reunited in heaven. Overall, women were confident that keeping their children affiliated with eschatological beliefs will help to instil community principles and shape social behaviour. Farah stated:

> Our *Majalis* (religious sermons) teaches our children to stay focused on the next world ... and on their role as followers of *Imam Mahdi*. Health crises will come and go. We must keep building values of justice and piety.

Women also explained how ORCs sermons brought more lucidity to what God might want youth to learn from the pandemic and what values need to be strengthened in society, such as individual practices for public health- like wearing a mask and self-isolating. The connection between individual preventive behaviour, community ethics, and gains for public health was made through giving examples of the *Ahlebait*. Laila shared:

> This year (2020) the sermons focused on reminding us that the *Ahlebait* always placed community progress and safety before individual gains. Perhaps this is why the pandemic has been sent by God ... so that we revisit and instill these principles (community spirit) in our own and our children's lives.

Developing a spirit of voluntary employment for the religious centre

Women participants (n = 10) shared that ORCs provided them and their children with the opportunity to remain engaged in voluntary work, which helped in securing loyalty and affiliation with the sect. Mothers shared how they, and their parents, had been performing several voluntary duties for management of the religious centre since childhood. It was this commitment to provide voluntary time and energy for maintenance of the community that women wanted to transmit to their children. Participants described how their children were better at helping with the online technological maintenance and suggestions for sermon topics and activities, compared to the adults in the community. Tasks that children were helping to manage for the ORCs were included: 1. Communicating with online followers and coordinating with other volunteers and; 2. Coordinating with religious scholars and reciters of *Marsiya* and *Nauha* (religious poetry); 3. Decision-making for sermon topics and centre activities; and 4. Maintenance of online groups, and posting of videos and audios. Additionally, apart from upholding religious values, voluntary employment for the ORC gave children a sense of purpose during the pandemic and social distancing. Anam described:

> I am one of the group administrators of our Whatsapp group . . . but the main help comes from my children, as they are tech savvy. My son (age 13) edits and uploads video sermons . . . my daughter coordinates the weekly completion of the Quran on our Whatsapp group. I pray that they (the children) always retain this spirit of volunteering their time and energy for the community.

Discussion

Findings suggest that mothers deem partnership with the ORCs to be vital for transmission of religious values during the pandemic. Under two broad headings, it is revealed that mothers aim for their children to remain affiliated with the religious community to gain benefits of value transmission and also for the development of community orientation. With respect to the first broad finding of 'Transmitting beliefs and influencing religious practice', it was found that participants depended on online congregational prayers to teach their children about seeking intercession from the *Ahlebait*. Previous research also confirms that religious communities that promote congregational prayer have a powerful role in developing social values and behaviour (Monib and Din 2013). Participants wanted their children to derive meaning about sickness through religious role models and life stories of Prophets and their descendants. Other research corroborates that parents, in times of uncertainty and health crises, turn to religious role models to teach children about coping (Bader and Desmond 2006).

Women and their families benefit from sectarian consumerism and separation from non-preferred rituals through online religious activities. Online options related to different timings, activities and topics provide mother and child with more efficiency and control to manage their daily tasks and multiple responsibilities. The findings suggest that lived experiences in a world affected by components of consumerism and Macdonaldization (Ritzer 2013; Lyon 2013) also influence demand for rights of choice from the religious centre. Shia religious congregations are known to be dominated by long sessions of rituals, including wailing, beating and veneration of replicas (Hussain

2005). In this study, interestingly, it was found that women prefer for their children to abandon singular rituals and instead focus on derived values through historical facts, theological reasoning, and guidance on practice. This growing preference in Shia communities for wanting to connect with practical aspects of the religion and avoiding hagiography and rituals has been discussed by previous scholarship (Dogra 2019).

Staying connected with the religious community is a means for Shia women to ensure sectarian conformity in children with regard to cultural habits and norms, including dressing, speech and behaviour. The findings corroborate previous research in that conformance to sectarian culture is a substantial desire in parents (Giuliani, Olivari, and Alfieri 2017). Mothers also prefer ORCs as it helps to safeguard their children from violence and abuse. Previous research confirms that persecution against Shia minorities in Pakistan is a historical reality, ranging from segregation to violence, and even genocide (Rieck 2015). Thus for many participants ORCs are not just a safe option during the pandemic, but also a rational option for protection from public instances of violence while visiting religious centres. Mothers rationalised that online religious affiliation was a form of *Taqaiyya*, and that practicing faith in private was approved and legitimised by the *Ahlebait*. This practice of *Taqaiyya* for the sake of safety amongst Shia populations has been researched by others (Jafari et al. 2016).

With respect to the second broad heading of 'developing community orientation', findings shift to a more meso and macro-level desire in mothers for their children to gain values that will help them stay connected to their religion in the modern world and become better community members of society. Mothers in this study confirm previous research, of wanting their children to remain connected with the sectarian community for the development of both current friendships and lifelong networks (Muller and Ellison 2001). It was also significant to find that women rely on the network-building of children to help in the future maintenance of values for inter-sect and arranged marriages, joint family arrangement, and care support for the elderly within the homes. This study further reveals that mothers deemed it essential for children to remain attached to the sectarian community through voluntary employment, as they believed this would increase loyalty to sectarian beliefs (Nissilä 2019; Cnaan et al. 2016).

Women believe children's affiliation with the ORCs is also helping them to remain committed to principles of charity, religious taxes and *Ijtihad*. The health crises has brought into focus for women the importance of inculcating charity-giving and supporting the poor as a basic principal and also as a deterrent against further calamities. Previous research also confirms the relationship between religious affiliation and commitment to charity (Brooks 2004). ORCs also afford women the opportunity to keep their children aware of *Ijtihad* and the evolving developments in Islamic rights and laws. Mothers believed that commitment to staying updated about *Ijtihad* would help their children's faith with regard to Islam being a religion for all times. Other research also confirms that during the pandemic there has been additional need to understand what legitimate religious scholars are concluding with regard to public gatherings and congregational worship (Nuryana, Fauzi, and Fauzi 2020).

Mothers also seek to guide their children about their community role by deriving practical knowledge from eschatological beliefs. As followers who await the return of *Imam Mahdi* and Prophet Jesus (peace be upon them), this study also confirms that Shia women want their children to commit to values of justice and piety in order for

them to gain entry to heaven (Sachedina 1981). Also, eschatological beliefs are considered essential to promote community responsibility in children with regard to practicing protective behaviour during the pandemic as a moral and pious act. Other scholarship confirms that religious beliefs and values can play a positive role in the acceptance of health information and adoption of health behaviour (Chatters, Levin, and Ellison 1998).

This study has its limitations of a small sample size and online purposive sampling. Participants in the study reflect the educated Shia population who are affiliated with the religious centre online and thus findings cannot be generalised. Also, the sample represents women and families that have good technology and Wi-Fi resources to participate in online religious activities. Future researchers may want to explore areas that this research could not delve into, including: (i) sampling fathers and grandparents in joint family systems to investigate their perceptions of the transmission of religious values through online religious communities and (ii) pursuing longitudinal and quantitative data collection about the actual shift to online religious activities and the impact of transmission of religious values on practices and behaviour.

However, this study has strengths in shedding light on important religious values mothers believe are being transmitted to children through ORCs. Based on findings for preference for ORCs in the future, there is need for further investigation about how religious centres may have to adapt to increased demands for online services (Pillay 2020). There is also a critical need for the state to remain involved in the regulation and surveillance of ORCs (Campbell 2004), and the possibility of extremist agents using online communities for manipulating religious beliefs in youth (Yaseen and Muzaffar 2018). There is also the concern about the overuse of technology and long hours spent online, which may lead to problems related to social isolation, and deterioration in physical and mental health (Diomidous et al. 2016). On a positive note, we may debate that ORCs have great potential to open convenient online avenues for cross-religious participation, which may promote interfaith harmony (Hackett 2006) and develop collaboration for common social welfare goals (Rizvi Jafree 2020)

Concluding implications

The study findings suggest that online religious services during the pandemic are an important coping and support mechanism for acceptance of reality and meaning-making about sickness. The implication is that there is a greater role for ORCs, during and beyond the pandemic, in partnering with structures of family and the educations system for the transmission of both religious values and absorption of community norms in youth. Secondly, the finding that sectarian affiliation has the capacity to invent innovative ways to deal with world challenges implies that ORCs can also have a significant role in promoting preventive health and public health ethics in youth. Finally, though there are obvious benefits of ORCs in maintaining sectarian affiliation for specific sects, beyond this, the study infers that online religious services which promote broader ethical values, common to world religions, can play an immense role in promoting interfaith communication and coordination for common social welfare goals.

Notes

1. Honorific title used for a religious and spiritual leader greatly admired and respected by the Muslim community.
2. Honorific title given to a religious leader and successor of Prophet Muhammad (with regard to knowledge of Islam) in Shia faith.
3. *Imam Mahdi* is believed by Shias to be from the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) family and is regarded as the saviour leader who will come before judgement day, with Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him), to lead the world towards equity, justice and peace.
4. The *Ahlebait* for Shia Muslims translates to the closest kin of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) including his daughter Fatima, cousin and son in law Ali, and grand-sons Hassan and Hussain.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Sara Rizvi Jafree completed her BSc Honours in Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science (London, United Kingdom), and her M-Phil and PhD in Sociology from the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of Punjab (Lahore, Pakistan). She has published over 25 research papers in areas of Public Health and Social Policy. Some of the reputed international journals she has published with include: BMJ Open, Journal of Community Psychology, International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work, Journal of Social Work in Health Care, BMC Safety in Health, BMC Health Services Research, BMC Medical Ethics, and Asian Women. She is a recipient of four research grants for projects as lead Principal Investigator, and has successfully led large research teams for policy mobilisation in areas of microfinance social development, microinsurance interventions for the health of impoverished populations, and intergenerational learning for the elderly. Dr. Jafree is the author of two books published by Oxford University Press and Springer, respectively. Both books, 'Women, Healthcare and Violence in Pakistan' and 'The Sociology of South Asian Women's Health' have addressed important issues related to women's health and safety. She is currently working on two intervention-based research projects for digital health literacy in the primary sector and healthcare practitioner leadership for infection control and is committed to keeping her students involved for training in different research steps. She is currently completing her online Post-Doctorate Fellowship degree from University of Oxford while managing teaching and research work for research clusters related to special needs children and the social impact of coronavirus.

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Appendix A

Books

- *Women, Healthcare, and Violence in Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, 2018
https://global.oup.com/academic/product/women-healthcare-and-violence-in-pakistan-9780199406067?cc=us&lang=en
- *The Sociology of South Asian Women's Health*, Springer Nature, 2020
https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-50204-1

Selected Impact Factor, Peer-Reviewed Research Publications in International Academic Journals

(1) Jafree, S. R., (2021). The Need for Cultural Interventions to Improve Girls' Education during COVID-19 and Beyond, March, ESymposia, International Sociological Association, https://esymposium.isaportal.org/resources/resource/the-need-for-cultural-interventions-to-improve-girls-education-during-covid-19-and-beyond/

(2) Jafree SR, Mahmood QK, Momina AU, Fisher F, and Barlow J (2021) Protocol for a systematic review of barriers, facilitators and outcomes in primary healthcare services for women in Pakistan; BMJ Open 2021;11:e043715; https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/11/3/e043715.full.pdf

(3) Jafree SR, Bukhari N, Muzamill A (2021) Digital health literacy intervention to support maternal, child and family health in primary healthcare settings of Pakistan during the age of coronavirus: study protocol for a randomised controlled trial, BMJ Open, 11:e045163.; http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-045163

(4) Rizvi Jafree, S., Mahmood, Q. K., Burhan, S. K., & Khawar, A. (2021). Protective Factors for Life Satisfaction in Ageing Populations Residing in Public Sector Old Age Homes of Pakistan: Implications for Social Policy. Journal of Ageing and Environment, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/26892618.2021.1887042

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(7) Rizvi Jafree S., Zakar R, Ahsan H (2021) Impact of microfinance health interventions on health-related outcomes among female informal workers in Pakistan: a retrospective quasi-experimental study. *BMJ Open*; http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-043544

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(9) Mahmood, Q.K., & Rizvi Jafree, S. (2020) Pakistani Youth and Social Media Addiction: the Validation of Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale, *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, Springer https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00391-0

(10) Rizvi Jafree, S. (2020) Determinants of depression in women with chronic disease: Evidence from a sample of poor loan takers from Pakistan, *Journal of Community Psychology*, WILEY; https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22399

(11) Mahmood, Q.K., & Rizvi Jafree, S. (2020) The Psychometric Validation of FCV19S in Urdu and Socio-Demographic Association with Fear in the People of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province in Pakistan, *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, Springer; https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00371-4

(12) Rizvi Jafree, S., Burhan, S.K. (2020) Health challenges of mothers with special needs children in Pakistan and the importance of integrating health social workers, *Social Work in Health Care*, Taylor & Francis https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2020.1781738

(13) Rizvi Jafree, S., M. Mustafa (2020). The Triple Burden of Disease, Destitution and Debt: Pakistani Women Microfinance Borrowers Health Challenges, *Health Care for Women International*, Taylor & Francis https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2020.1716236

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