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*Inequality and the Militant Threat in  
Pakistan*

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Militancy seems to be gaining ground in Pakistan, judging by the perceptible increase in the frequency of terrorist attacks. The nature of the attacks is also changing, and reflects a newfound confidence amongst militant groups who are graduating from ambushes to suicide bombings and, as demonstrated in the March 29 attack on the Manawan police training school in Lahore, attempts to seize government buildings and public spaces and even take hostages.

The causes of militancy are complex, and usually a combination of factors, rather than any one single feature, pushes mainly young people into the embrace of militant groups. Poverty and inequality are frequently cited as key causes. Poverty is a contributing factor pushing people towards militancy, provided an enabling environment already exists.<sup>i</sup> This enabling environment is characterized by the local economy lacking employment opportunities, the presence of members of militant groups in a community, proximity to a conflict zone, and/or persistent exposure to extremist literature and media. Most of these factors are often present in areas where militancy is strongest. This paper examines inequality, one of the possible factors influencing recruitment into militant organizations.

A number of studies from all over the world have been followed to understand the link between militancy and inequality in Pakistan in particular and elsewhere in general. Although evidences from history have been furnished, the paper does not take an inclusive look at the historical background of the topic under discussion.

A recent study by the Islamabad-based Center for Research on Poverty Reduction and Income Distribution (CRPRID) provides a historical overview of how income inequality has evolved in Pakistan.<sup>ii</sup> Anwar reviews estimates of Gini coefficients derived in different studies based on successive Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES) by the Federal Bureau of Statistics. In 2003, the World Bank assessed data from HIES for 1998-99 and found that the value of the Gini coefficient for rural areas was 0.25, while it was estimated at 0.35 for urban areas.<sup>iii</sup> Estimates from the Federal Bureau of Statistics of Pakistan on the same data set were very similar – 0.36 for urban areas and 0.25 for rural areas. Anwar's own estimates for inequality are based on the HIES data for 2001-02, and show that the Gini coefficient has remained stable over the years in question. He estimates that the coefficient for urban areas is 0.36, while for rural areas it is 0.25 – exactly the same as the World Bank estimates for 1998-99.

Anwar acknowledges that the Gini coefficient has some shortcomings as a measure of income inequality, in that it does not capture small changes at extreme ends of the income distribution spectrum. He therefore looks at income inequality also as a share of total income accruing to the poorest 20 percent, middle 60 percent and richest 20 percent of the population. The income share analysis shows a worsening of income inequality in Pakistan over the 1990s. (see Table 1)

Table 1: Income Share Accruing to Different Groups<sup>iv</sup>

Year	Income Share of Pakistan's Population (Percent)		
	Poorest 20 percent	Middle 60 percent	Richest 20 percent
1990-91	6.07	46.40	47.53
1992-93	6.59	46.97	46.44
1993-94	6.57	47.75	45.69
1996-97	7.11	49.38	43.51
1998-99	6.57	44.76	48.67
2001-02	6.66	45.26	48.08
<i>Rural</i>			
1990-91	6.00	45.35	48.65
1992-93	7.12	48.65	44.23
1993-94	7.14	48.82	44.04
1996-97	7.24	49.99	42.77
1998-99	7.14	47.41	45.45
2001-02	7.21	47.69	45.11
<i>Urban</i>			
1990-91	6.76	48.20	45.05
1992-93	6.59	46.71	46.70
1993-94	7.04	48.67	44.29
1996-97	7.52	47.82	44.66
1998-99	6.62	41.73	51.65
2001-02	6.77	40.42	52.81

Urban inequality shows the most obvious negative trend, with over half of total income accruing to the richest 20 percent of the population by 2001-02. The data shows disturbing trends across groups also. The erosion of the share of income accruing to the middle 60 percent of the population was very sharp in urban areas, where the share of this income group went from 48.2 percent of total income to 40.4 percent over the decade in question. The data points to the fact that the poorest 20 percent got a meager share of total income, and their holdings remained largely unchanged. However, the income loss of the middle classes was acute, particularly in urban areas.

Another recent study by Kemal concentrates on policy actions to reduce income inequality.<sup>v</sup> Kemal reviews the literature on income inequality to identify four factors that govern the distribution of income. These are: asset distribution – mainly the inequality in distribution of agricultural land; functional income distribution – inequality in wage income in urban areas and the disparity in farm and non-farm income in rural areas; income transfers – both domestic and international; and, the tax and expenditure structure of the government – particularly the reliance on indirect taxes which are essentially regressive. Kemal advocates four major policy areas to deal with rising income inequality – greater investment in basic infrastructure and in the provision of basic social services, employment creation and cash and food transfers.

Current studies on income inequality in Pakistan do not provide a breakdown of the Gini coefficient or household income shares by district or region. However, a number of studies have been carried out on land distribution in rural Pakistan, which provide some indication of income distribution patterns by region. A recent paper by Anwar et al. used data from the Pakistan Integrated Household Survey (PIHS) 2001-02 to explore the link between landlessness and rural poverty in Pakistan.<sup>vi</sup> The paper found that 75 percent of households in the country do not hold any land. A further 23.9 percent hold less than 1 hectare. Only 0.02 percent of households own more than 5 hectares of land.

The study further found that poverty levels were exceptionally high amongst landless households. In Punjab, poverty incidence amongst landless households was 44.4 percent, while the same estimate for households owning less than 1 hectare was 26.2 percent. The situation was worse in Sindh and NWFP. In the former, poverty incidence amongst landless households was 58.6 percent, while in NWFP it was 65.4 percent.

Further breakdowns by province showed that in Sindh, 85 percent of households did not own any land, while this proportion was 78 percent in Balochistan, 74 percent in Punjab and 65.4 in NWFP. The Gini coefficient was also calculated for both landholdings and income in Punjab and yielded the following results.

Table 2: Gini Coefficients by Region<sup>vii</sup>

	<i>Punjab</i>	<i>Sindh</i>	<i>NWFP</i>	<i>Balochistan</i>	<i>Pakistan</i>
Gini (Land owned)	0.64	0.51	0.59	0.38	0.61
Gini (Expenditure)	0.31	0.31	0.27	0.23	0.31

Thus the Gini for land ownership showed significantly greater inequality in all three provinces other than Balochistan, compared to the Gini for income/expenditure. The authors concluded that this may point to under-reporting of income by higher-income households, which skewed the value of the Gini coefficient for income/expenditure downwards. As the data shows, the Gini for land ownership was highest in Punjab, followed by NWFP, Sindh and Balochistan.

The literature explicitly states that income inequality has increased in Pakistan over the 1990s, and was at the highest recorded level in urban areas in 2001-02. Although more recent estimates are not available, the service sector-oriented growth of the years since 2002 has probably served to perpetuate, if not worsen, inequality. What effects could that have had on the growing terrorist threat in Pakistan?

Growth and inequality in Pakistan has been discussed by Griffin and Khan. They highlight that inequality in per capita income between West Pakistan and East Pakistan and in the different rates of economic development were a factor in the militant revolt of East

Pakistan against the West.<sup>viii</sup> The ratio of true capital inflow was only 16% of true investment for East Pakistan for the period 1964-5 to 1967-8, whereas the corresponding ratio for West Pakistan was 75%. In the early 1970s, Parkinson observed that the scope for increasing the real income of wage earners in Pakistan is limited.<sup>ix</sup> Rashida Patel discusses judicio-legal inequality, i.e., how laws have been misinterpreted and distorted.<sup>x</sup>

Inequality may be defined as “the unfair difference between groups of people in society, when some have more wealth, status or opportunities than others.”<sup>xi</sup> Such unfair differences may potentially lead to polarization, a sense of relative deprivation, bias, prejudices and discrimination in a society. It has been argued that “discontent, or relative deprivation, is a major determinant of political protest and violence.”<sup>xii</sup>

When discussing poverty, inequality often refers to the income gap between the rich and poor of society.<sup>xiii</sup> But, inequality is not confined only to the income gap among individuals, families and groups in a society. It has many other dimensions.

While the literature on the subject lists a number of forms of inequality, a simple classification of the term divides it into two forms, i.e., inequality between persons (e.g. income inequality) and inequality between subgroups (e.g. racial inequality).<sup>xiv</sup>

Which form of inequality is most prevalent when it comes to the causes of militancy in a society is a difficult question to answer. Theorists following the Marxist line of argument would place economic inequality at the top, and the liberals would assert the importance of political inequality. But, one thing is clear that in Pakistan political as well as economic disparities have contributed to bringing the whole society to a stage where militancy and insecurity among the citizens are at an all-time high.

Various forms of inequality and their link to militancy have been discussed in this paper. A priority, however, has been given to ‘economic and income inequality.’ That is why, in literature review, empirical and quantitative studies regarding economic and income inequality have been mentioned in comparatively greater detail.

The regional breakdown of inequality in Pakistan does not enable us to make a definitive judgment about its connection with militancy. Inequality in land ownership is high in NWFP and Punjab, both provinces with significant militant activity; but inequality in income/expenditure distribution is highest in Punjab and Sindh, of which the latter province has not yet figured prominently as a recruiting ground for militants.

Nevertheless, more subtle links cannot be ruled out. Militant agendas appeal to disaffected youth, and inequality breeds resentment and anger. The few studies of profiles of militants<sup>xv</sup> point to a high degree of representation of educated, lower middle class youth, who are disillusioned with the system of governance in Pakistan. The fall in the income share of the middle 60 percent of households, as documented by Anwar, is telling in this regard.

But perhaps the most important way in which inequality may contribute to militancy, given the presence of other circumstances, is in terms of the possibilities for exercise of power and control over resources that joining a militant organization can generate. In economic systems like Pakistan's, where land distribution is highly unequal, and access to quality education is limited, social mobility is highly restricted. In the absence of wealth, or opportunities for personal growth through better education and health care, the lure of an organization that provides a livelihood, opportunities to wield economic power, and even forms of insurance coverage for the larger family, becomes ever stronger. Thus inequality in the initial distribution of assets may lead to the emergence of a rigid class structure, which in turn may be a breeding ground for militancy. The Gini coefficient for land distribution in Pakistan certainly suggests that such rigid systems exist and are perpetuated in Pakistan's rural areas.

Most studies on the subject suggest a positive relationship between militancy and inequality. In the 1970s, Sigelman and Simpson also noted: "A remarkably diverse literature, both ancient and modern, both ideological and theoretical, has coalesced on the proposition that political violence is a function of economic inequality."<sup>xvi</sup> They cite Aristotle, Madison, Engels, Coser and Davis from this diverse literature. To Aristotle, inequality is the "universal and chief cause" of revolutions. "Inferiors revolt in order that they may be equal, and equals that they may be superior," argued Aristotle in *The Politics*. In Madison's view, inequality in the distribution of property is the "most common and durable" source of political violence. Engel was of the view that if political structures do not conform to imperatives of socioeconomic conditions, political violence results. Coser argued, "Conflict is largely the product of persisting socioeconomic inequalities." To Davis, who drew on Aristotle's theory of revolution, unequal distribution of incomes spurs mass resentment and paves the path of resolution.

Blau and Blua and Harer and Steffensmeier also argued that "greater economic inequality is the mechanism whereby conflict and hostilities are reflected in...violence."<sup>xvii</sup> Martinez studied patterns and causes of lethal violence among Latinos in the United States. He examined data collected from 111 US cities and found that regression analysis supports economic inequality interpretation of violence.<sup>xviii</sup> In a study, after reviewing theory and research, Kramer concludes that economic inequality is one of the three causal agents in producing violence by young people in the US.<sup>xix</sup> 'Predatory economic' form of violence, he argues,<sup>xx</sup>

occurs in the pursuit of monetary or materialistic goals by any means necessary. Given the intense cultural pressures for monetary success in America, economically disadvantaged youths who are blocked from less effective, legitimate means are often inclined to select more effective, illegitimate means to pursue the American Dream.

The argument can easily be extended to a society where economic inequality is profound. Militant criminal gangs in different parts of Pakistan, particularly in Karachi, indicate that the above does hold in Pakistan as well.

In Weede's view, income inequality "presumably is one of the background conditions of relative deprivation."<sup>xxi</sup> Previous research shows that violence-reducing impact of high average incomes is fairly strong, he observed. Weede concluded that "high average income is strongly related to less violence, in particular to less deaths from such violence." He further writes, "While my results cannot add support to a relative deprivation explanation of violence, they certainly cannot falsify it, either." In another study, on the other hand, Weede analyzed a compilation of data collected during the mid-1960s, which covered 47 nations, and concluded that inequality does not contribute to violence.<sup>xxii</sup>

Differences in per capita income or household income across populations within a country or across countries can be taken among the factors for militancy. It is true both at national and international levels. Profound disparities exist between the global South and North. Kegley and Wittkopf point out that these disparities pose huge problems for international community and are a major issue on the global agenda. Many of the theoreticians hold rich countries responsible for the plight of the Third World countries. Dependency Theory is one such theory.<sup>xxiii</sup> World System Theory is another.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Unequal and uneven land distribution represents a key determinant of rural income inequality in the Third World.<sup>xxv</sup> According to Russett, "there is positive correlation between inequality of land ownership and some measures of political violence."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Political inequality refers to "structured differences in the distribution and acquisition of political resources."<sup>xxvii</sup> Although, constitutionally, all citizens enjoy equal political opportunities, that is not the case in practice.<sup>xxviii</sup> Only the rich and influential can get into power. This informal but deep-rooted inequality in Pakistan's political system and structure keeps the majority of the people disempowered.

In Pakistan, members of religious minorities are victims of social inequality in general. The majority sees and treats them as inferior. At times, such feelings have led to intolerance and violence. It is a phenomenon which is also found in neighboring India where communal clashes are a common occurrence. Taliban actions against the Sikh community in the Tribal Areas are the most recent example of a religious minority becoming a victim of inequality in Pakistan. Many a time such victims come to the conclusion that they cannot survive if they remain peaceful; hence, they are forced to think that militancy and violence are the only ways to ensure their survival.

Disparity in education systems in Pakistan immediately comes to mind in context of inequality of opportunity. The most intelligent students coming from a poor background have no option for education except going to public sector education institutions where the medium of instruction is Urdu or a regional language. English medium education institutions are expensive and beyond the reach of the poor. These institutions cater to the wealthy and the elite. Graduates of these English medium institutions are far better equipped to do well in competition exams for senior positions in the bureaucracy. All of the competition exams favor the candidates with higher capacity for expressing and

communicating in English. Thus, practically, there is no equality of opportunity at all for those educated from institutions where English is not the medium of instruction.

Inequality of opportunity is also linked to another type of inequality – the rural-urban one. The rural and urban life in Pakistan is worlds apart. In rural areas, education, health and other facilities are either non-existent or in shambles. Rural areas provide a huge portion (around 80%) of the labor force. The rural population sees the urban population as enjoying the fruits of their labor and at their expense. All aspects of life in rural areas suffer from a huge level of inequality. Many of the villagers resent the wealth, attitudes and lifestyles of those living in cities. Unemployed or underemployed youths in rural areas can easily be drawn to militant groups.

Amartya Sen enumerates seven types of gender inequality, including basic facility inequality, special opportunity inequality, professional inequality, ownership inequality, and household inequality.<sup>xxxix</sup> He points out that inequalities of different kinds can, often enough, feed each other. Like most of the developing countries, extensive gender asymmetry exists in Pakistan. The ratio of male students' enrolment in primary schools is 30 percent higher than that of females'.<sup>xxx</sup> Feminists see the 1979 Hudood Ordinances as the most "discriminatory piece of legislation that Pakistani women have ever seen."<sup>xxxi</sup>

Women do not enjoy equal status in Pakistani society in any area, be that education, occupation, business, politics, or cultures. They do not have much opportunity of interaction with society and social agents. The result is that, due to a virtual lack of being influenced by the agents of social change, Pakistani women, in general, tend to be more conservative compared to men. Their conservatism becomes a source for amplifying conservatism in men who remain in contact with them. Conservatism directly leads individuals towards violence and militancy. It is not uncommon that mothers, sisters and wives of killed militants feel pride in their killed relatives and hail them as heroes.

The causes or factors of inequality are not discussed in this paper and it remains mainly concerned with the relationship between forms of inequality and militancy. However, it is irresistible not to touch upon international dimension of the relationship between the two variables in Pakistani context. The militants, who pose the most serious challenge to the state, have a very 'strong' worldview in terms of Western powers' conspiracies against Muslims as well as "the Muslim world". They see these conspiracies working at all levels – political, economic, cultural, etc. Their perception of inequality between Muslim and non-Muslim countries as a consequence of the anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic policies of developed nations has largely contributed to the spread of militancy and violence within Pakistan and beyond. Such militants view 'anti-Islamic' policies of Western powers as the most important source of inequality between rich and poor states.

In addition to their policies, Western transnational corporations are seen as exploiting and disturbing the economic structures of developing states. London and Robinson, citing Bornschier and Chase-Dunn, also agree that corporate penetration adds to income

inequality in developing states “by altering certain structural conditions.” Transnational corporations, located in the developing world, pay “well above the going rate.” It leads to “a large income gap between those citizens who are employed by transnational firms and those who are not.”<sup>xxxii</sup> This is the reason that almost all militant leaders who criticize Western powers do so in part because of the international economic and political system shaped by these powers that they deem exploitative. How can this exploitation be responded to? By harming those and their interests who have harmed us, argue the militant leaders and ideologues. So, they ask their activists to target the interests and citizens of Western powers.

## Conclusion

In light of the cited arguments and empirical researches, one can safely argue that inequality is a strong contributing factor towards militancy in Pakistan. Furthermore, it is causing further increase in militancy in the country. Pakistani state and society have badly failed to address various forms of inequality which are responsible for feelings of estrangement and resentment among the worst-off. Frequent demands of speedy justice and complaints about the decay in the judicio-legal system of the country led the government to concede to Taliban’s demand, accompanied by an armed campaign, of Nizam-i-Adl Regulation in Swat.

Victims of inequality – whether economic, social, political, legal or in any other form – at a later stage, start viewing the sociopolitical, economic and legal system as flawed and favoring a part of society while disfavoring another. It makes them think about revolting against the system, leading to militancy. Peaceful societies are peaceful largely because they have achieved political, legal and civic equality.

## Notes and References

<sup>i</sup> Safiya Aftab, “Poverty and Radicalization,” *PIPS Journal of Conflict and Peace Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 65-86.

<sup>ii</sup> Talat Anwar, *Long-Term Changes in Income Distribution in Pakistan: Evidence Based on Consistent Series of Estimates*, (CRPRID, Aug. 2005).

<sup>iii</sup> The value of the Gini coefficient varies from 0 to 1, with 0 showing perfect equality, and 1, absolute inequality. Thus a higher coefficient is indicative of greater inequality.

<sup>iv</sup> Source: Anwar, 2005, Table 5.

<sup>v</sup> A.R. Kemal, “Income Inequalities in Pakistan and a Strategy to Reduce Income Inequalities,” paper prepared for Ministry of Finance as a background paper for PRSP II, Islamabad, 2007.

<sup>vi</sup> Talat Anwar, Sarfaraz Qureshi and Hammad Ali, “Landlessness and Rural Poverty in Pakistan,” paper presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2004.

<sup>vii</sup> Source: Anwar, et. al., 2005. Table 7.

- <sup>viii</sup> J. R. Parkinson, review of *Growth and Inequality in Pakistan* by Kechth Griffin and Azizur Rahman Khan (eds.), *The Economic Journal* 83, no. 329, (Mar. 1973), p. 320.
- <sup>ix</sup> J. R. Parkinson, review of *Growth and Inequality in Pakistan* by Kechth Griffin and Azizur Rahman Khan (eds.), *The Economic Journal* 83, no. 329, (Mar. 1973), p. 322.
- <sup>x</sup> Rashida Patel, *Woman versus Man: Socio-legal Gender Inequality in Pakistan*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- <sup>xi</sup> Oxford Advanced learners Dictionary, 2005.
- <sup>xii</sup> Erich Weede, "Income Inequality, Average Income, and Domestic Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 25, no. 4 (Dec. 1981) p. 640.
- <sup>xiii</sup> [http://library.thinkquest.org/05qug/00282/other\\_glossary.htm](http://library.thinkquest.org/05qug/00282/other_glossary.htm) , accessed on May 11, 2009.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Guillermina Jasso, IZA, *Two Types of inequality: Inequality Between Persons and Inequality Between Subgroups*, 2007.
- <sup>xv</sup> See Safiya Aftab, "Poverty and Radicalization, 2008.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Lee Sigelman and Miles Simpson, "A Cross-National Test of the Linkage Between Economic Inequality and Political Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 21, no. 1, (Mar. 1977).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Cited in Ramiro Martinez, Jr., "Latinos and Lethal Violence: The Impact of Poverty and Inequality," *Social Problems* 43, no. 2 (May 1996).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ramiro Martinez, Jr., "Latinos and Lethal Violence: The Impact of Poverty and Inequality," *Social Problems* 43, no. 2 (May 1996).
- <sup>xix</sup> Other two agents are poverty and social exclusion.
- <sup>xx</sup> Ronald C. Kramer, "Poverty, Inequality and Youth Violence," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 567 (Jan. 2000).
- <sup>xxi</sup> Erich Weede, "Income Inequality, Average Income, and Domestic Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25, no. 4 (Dec. 1981), p. 639.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Erich Weede, "Some New Evidence on Correlates of Political Violence: income inequality, regime repressiveness, and economic development," *European Sociological Review* 3, no. 2, (Sep. 1987).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Dependency Theory holds that relationship between the advanced capitalist societies and the developing countries is exploitative. Underdevelopment of the Global South has been caused by the division of the globe into two halves, one modern and the other backward. For detail see Charles W. Kegley, Jr., *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, (Wadsworth, 2008).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> World System Theory holds that the world is divided into a core, a periphery, and a semiperiphery. Advanced capitalist states make the 'core'. Developing state are 'periphery', and, ascending countries climbing from the periphery and declining countries falling from the ranks of the core are identified as 'semiperiphery'. Asian Tigers like Singapore and Taiwan fall into this category.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Richard H. Adams, Jr., "Agricultural Income, Cash Crops, and Inequality in Rural Pakistan," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 43, no. 3 (Apr. 1995), p. 467.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Cited in Erich Weede, "Income Inequality, Average Income, and Domestic Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Dec. 1981, p. 641.

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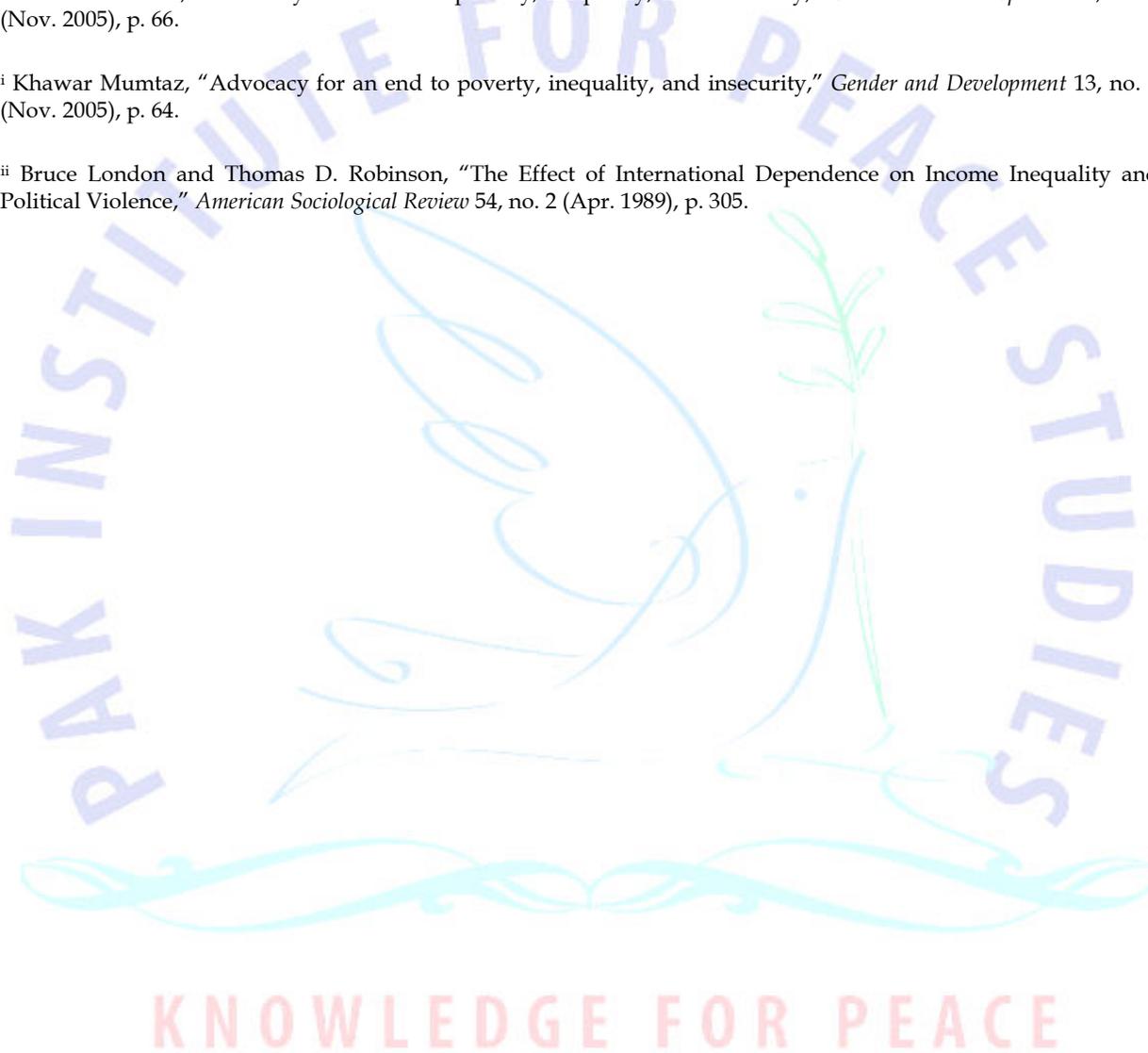
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