

IN HER OWN WORDS

ESSAYS BY PAKISTANI WOMEN



This material may not be copied, reproduced or transmitted in whole or in part without attribution to the Jinnah Institute (JI). Unless noted otherwise, all material in this publication is the property of the aforementioned Institute.

Copyright © Jinnah Institute 2017





IN HER OWN WORDS
ESSAYS BY PAKISTANI WOMEN

CONTRIBUTIONS

WOMEN IN POLITICS: A LONG ROAD HOME Aisha Sarwari	9
WOMEN IN THE TTP: RECRUITING ACROSS THE GENDER DIVIDE Meera Nadeem	13
REVOLUTIONIZING BUSINESS: WOMEN IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP Sadaffe Abid	17
SMASHING STEREOTYPES: THE PAKISTANI WOMAN Sehar Tariq	21
THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC SPACE Sadia Khatri	25
WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE HOUSE Marvi Sirmed	29
HIGH DRAMA: RETROGRESSIVE FICTIONS AND PAKISTANI SOAPS Fifi Haroon	33
ENDANGERED AT HOME: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND PROVINCIAL LEGISLATIONS Maliha Zia	41



1

WOMEN IN POLITICS:
A LONG ROAD HOME

WOMEN IN POLITICS: A LONG ROAD HOME

Aisha Sarwari

When a woman in Pakistan enters politics it is as though she has consciously decided to walk onto a minefield. Despite women parliamentarians enacting affirmative pro-women legislation and leading their male colleagues in contributions to parliamentary debate, far too many continue to face a media riot defaming them for transgressing any one of the unwritten codes of patriarchy entrenched within the system. Most Pakistani women in politics have been body-shamed, name-called and character-assassinated at least once in their careers, some routinely.

Nearly 21 per cent of members of parliament in Pakistan are women, compared to 12 per cent in India and 19 per cent in the United States. While some truly spirited women in politics have made their way to parliament through reserved seats, the majority are viewed as proxies for their male political family members. Even more troubling is the fact that this majority is securely representative of pervasive elitism. Women have also been unconstitutionally ousted from their seats by jirgas for being estranged with their husbands, under the public perception that the social clout of their male counterparts assisted in their successful election in the first place. During the last elections, for example, some political parties went as far as to exclude women from casting their vote in Lower Dir. Unfortunately, equality for women in politics is on the backbench of almost every political party's agenda, let alone the religious right. Despite these obstacles, however, reports indicate that the performance of women legislators in parliament and provincial assemblies over the last decade have surpassed those of their male counterparts nation-wide.

The way women are treated in politics is deterrent enough for new women lawmakers to enter the field. They are routinely undermined by men, and if they speak out against it, gendered privilege allows these men to frighten them into silent corners. Those women lawmakers that step up and take on a media war against sexual harassment in politics face a vitriolic witch hunt both within their party and outside. It is common to witness a backlash against women parliamentarians across party and gender lines regardless of whether or not any harassment allegations are proven. It seems that women in politics must adopt a position of silence in order to be considered 'honourable' or worthy of respect.

Sadly, the irony is that women also face harassment by other women parliamentarians who themselves have been routinely victimized by sexism. Women across parties have been known to undermine those who come out with an accusation by associating it to blind ambition. Internalized misogyny it seems, not just plain old patriarchy, is the bane of women's limited involvement in politics.

It doesn't end there. Women also tend to get stonewalled when pushing ahead for legislative changes. Male lawmakers block their lobbying and consequently take away their decision-making mechanisms. This is why laws on maternity benefit, anti-acid-throwing, anti-violence and anti-harassment have stalled as much as they have – each step as difficult as trying to feed pine nuts to a hamster on a wheel. The system, a men's club in reality, pushes women far away from the sphere of influence. Male parliamentarians have repeatedly used grossly derogatory language against women parliamentarians. Currently, within the party, leadership reacts by giving such men more political accolades.

In the first general elections of 1970 in what is now present-day Pakistan, 77.8 voters were women compared with 100 men. Their ratio of participation in elections held almost half a century later slipped to 77.4. City to tehsil, it never diminishes. Equality of women in politics is a slogan, not a belief and women are therefore seen as an extension of male politicians.

The debate on women's participation in politics in Pakistan has largely remained confined to reserving women's seats, but the real issue is the lack of a level playing field, where intersectional women can step out and compete on their own terms. Ideally, with credentials that are not necessarily linked to a male guardian, nor propped up with campaign wealth. That is when real change will happen.

This cannot take place until the women who have found their way to parliamentary seats are first treated with the respect and authority they deserve. Their decisions must carry weight, and when they are wronged, there should be swift action against proven perpetrators. This will pave the way for others and will ultimately bring solidarity among women themselves.



2

WOMEN IN THE TTP:
RECRUITING ACROSS
THE GENDER DIVIDE

WOMEN IN THE TTP: RECRUITING ACROSS THE GENDER DIVIDE

Meera Nadeem

In the course of carrying out its anti-state insurgency, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has damaged or destroyed over 1,000 schools in Pakistan's tribal areas since 2001, waged a public campaign against girls' education, and claimed responsibility for the attack on activist Malala Yusufzai. With Operation Zarb-e-Azb having dismantled a considerable network of terrorist hardware and infrastructure since June 2014, the TTP has been forced to retrench under a relatively more decentralised operational network, with a newfound reliance on the Internet and social media to ensure propaganda continuity. With the launch of their latest offline magazine "Sunnat-e-Khula" this August 1, the militant organisation looks to target a different and potentially significant audience: the educated, urban Pakistani woman.

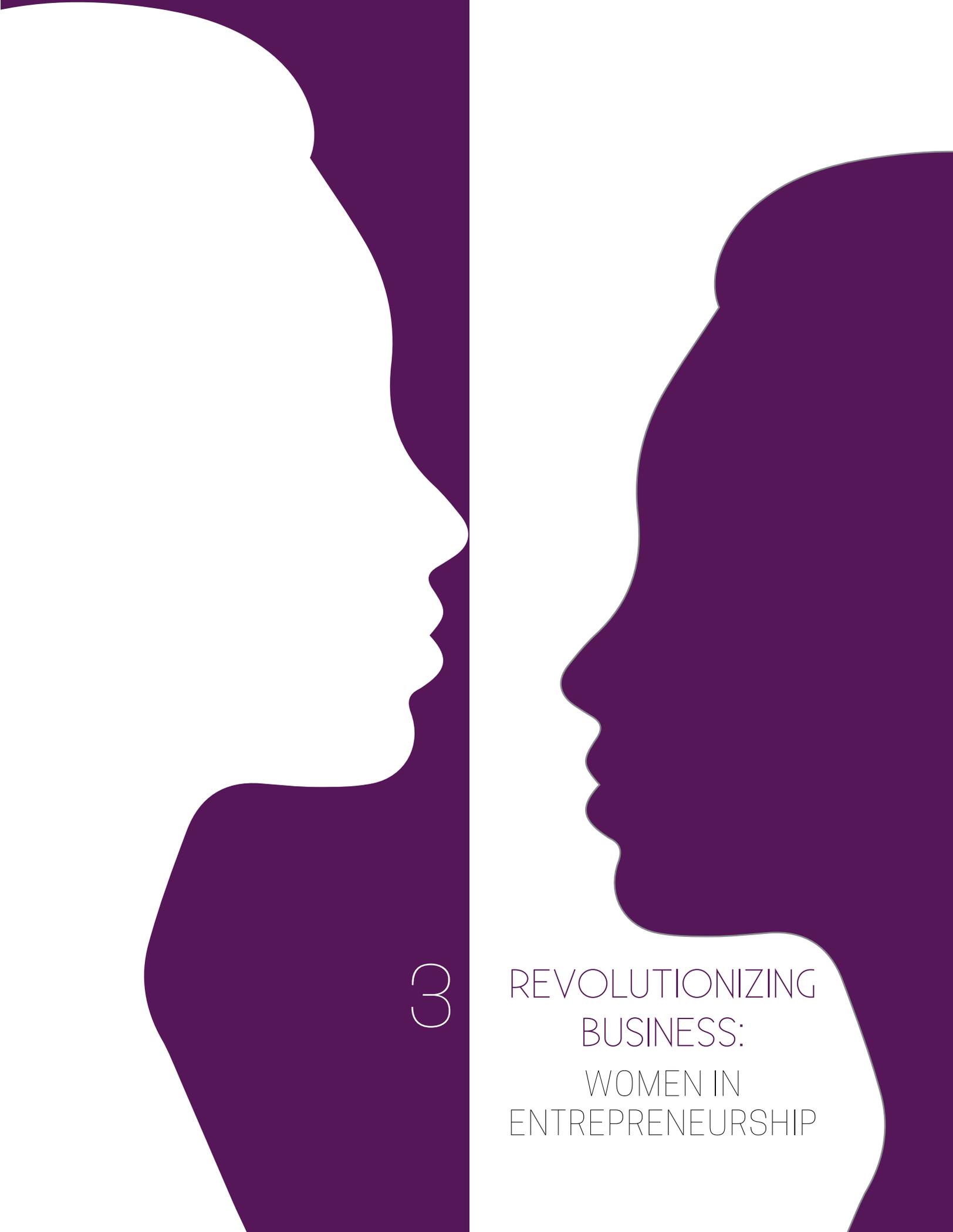
The TTP has issued publications in both Urdu and English to attract new recruits in the past; this time, however, the 45 page English-language magazine marks an unprecedented departure with the group exclusively tailoring its message to educated English speaking urban women, inviting them to adopt the jihadi way of life. The first issue of the publication opens with an editorial featuring the interview of the unnamed wife of TTP leader Fazlullah Khorasani, in which she propagates underage marriages as a way to fight the evils of society, and extols the virtues of being married to the militant leader at the age of 14. The magazine also features a story by a female Pakistani doctor about her journey from "ignorance to guidance" in which she traces her decision to shun her western education, and embrace the Islamic way of life. The magazine urges women to take up "jihad by pen," organise secret religious gatherings at home, and learn to operate weapons and grenades. It also includes an advice column for would-be lady jihadists.

This is not the first time the TTP has reached across the gender divide. Back in 2014, the organisation claimed to have an army of at-least 500 female suicide bombers ready to launch attacks in the country. Since 2015, Pakistan has witnessed a pronounced increase in the number of incidences of women's participation in transnational jihadist groups including Daesh and Al-Qaeda in South Asia. With its sophisticated use of social media, Daesh too has emerged as a highly potent, social-media savvy transnational outfit, regularly releasing graphic videos of brutal prisoner executions, designed to intimidate, broadcast intent, and seduce recruits to its cause. Four female recruits with links to Daesh have been arrested this year alone from Lahore, on top of eight arrested from Sargodha and Peshawar in 2016. An estimated 100 Pakistanis including women are reported to have travelled to Syria and Iraq from Pakistan to join Daesh in the Middle East. Despite limiting the role of women in society by banning education and relegating them primarily to the domestic sphere, the TTP has drawn up a blueprint for the participation of women under the specialised ambit of "women's jihad". Numbers are still sketchy, but from acting as facilitators and fundraisers for the Taliban in Swat, to pledging their allegiance to Daesh under the Jamia-e-Hafsa women's madrassah in Islamabad, women's representation in militant ranks is increasingly on the rise in Pakistan.

Even more alarming is the fact that educated urban women are willing to join Islamist terrorist groups that deny them the same rights as men, in many cases leaving their husbands, children and families behind to fight on behalf of terror outfits. In September 2015, Bushra Cheema, the principal of a Lahore based Islamic center left her husband and travelled to Syria along with her four children to join Daesh – a stunning example of the winds of radicalisation with the potential of affecting urban households. Religious hubs such as Al-Huda boast a marked presence throughout the country, and have come under scrutiny for encouraging hate and anti-western propaganda. The examples of 19 year old Naureen Leghari, a second year medical student arrested for her links to Daesh back in April 2017, and

Sadia Jalal, a university teacher and wife of an Al-Qaeda militant arrested for facilitating the Safoora Goth carnage of May 2015 are just a few examples of how extremist networks are playing both sides of a gender and class divide.

The launch of “Sunnat-e-Khula”, then, is indicative of a politically expedient strategy on the part of the TTP to further tap into these women’s lives and attempt to re-entrench themselves into civil society and popular culture. With the growing popularity and use of social media among terrorist groups, the TTP has taken to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to spread its message and build a following. While Army operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad have killed over 4,000 and arrested as many as 5,621 terrorists since June 2014, progress has been slow on regulating madrassas, blocking extremist messaging, and empowering the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) to holistically implement the government’s National Action Plan (NAP). Since its launch over two years ago, much of NAP has yet to be implemented, and with women recruits increasingly being incentivised by the TTP, militant narratives need to be countered aggressively to prevent further terrorist inroads, and therein, successes.



3

REVOLUTIONIZING
BUSINESS:
WOMEN IN
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

REVOLUTIONIZING BUSINESS: WOMEN IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Sadaffe Abid

More and more women are beginning to jump on to the entrepreneurial bandwagon. In the words of Melinda Gates, “when we invest in women and girls, we are investing in the people who invest in everyone else.” While Pakistan’s entrepreneurial scene faces several obstacles, a marked increase in women’s participation in entrepreneurship is both encouraging and validating. Innovation in Pakistan is on the rise, despite hurdles faced by budding start-ups, especially those run by women – this is a testament to Pakistan’s entrepreneurial spirit.

According to the Global Entrepreneur Monitor (GEM, 2015) more than 200 million women entrepreneurs are starting or running new businesses in 83 economies across the globe. In Pakistan, the entrepreneurship ecosystem has grown significantly over the last few years. A steady rise in new organizations, investment funds and initiatives to support entrepreneurs has been witnessed. As we enter the information era, there are greater opportunities for accessing new media resources and expanding the horizons of young, prospective entrepreneurs. Internet penetration has increased from 10% in 2012 to 17.8% in 2016 with 13.5 million broadband customers and 125 million mobile phone subscribers in Pakistan. Even more exciting is the unprecedented access to technology that is becoming available to one of our largest, underutilized resource reserves: women.

Research shows that companies with female founders perform 63% better than companies with all male founders. Women control approximately \$20 trillion in consumer spending worldwide, and this is expected to rise to \$28 trillion by 2018, with women making 80% of buying decisions. Despite the many benefits of female-led enterprises, however, only 22.7% of women contribute to Pakistan’s labor workforce, compared to 83.3% of men.

Why such few women? Pakistan is, as many countries in the region, a predominantly patriarchal society with many entrenched values and social mores. Women’s leadership roles are generally limited to running the household and caretaking while men take care of finances; a system which often leaves women with limited monetary independence or security. Due to rapid urbanization, increased cost of living, rising inflation and onset of the technological revolution, more women are starting to adopt a professional outlook to life by taking up white collar jobs and opting to set up small businesses.

The good news is, several upcoming entrepreneurs now have access to facilities which support women in their endeavors. Incubators provide free or subsidized office space and mentorship to businesswomen who are still in the developmental stages of building and testing their product or service. Currently, there are three notable incubators in Pakistan: The Nest i/o, LCE & Founder’s Institute, and Plan 9. Plan 9 is the country’s largest technology incubator. It’s an initiative by the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB), founded in 2012. Since then it has graduated 102 companies, 67 of which are still operational. Some of their graduates have gone on to join global incubation programs. The emergence of incubators, particularly for the technology sector, reflects a global trend that fulfills a strong need in Pakistan.

In fact, the technology sector in Pakistan has been focused specifically on the service industry. It is only recently that we have seen the rise of start-ups creating products. Alongside the incubators, there are several other initiatives, competitions and conferences which promote enthusiasm, networking and raising awareness. One of the more exciting upcoming opportunities for female entrepreneurs is the She Loves Tech (SLT) competition, a global initiative designed to showcase the convergence of the latest trends in technology, entrepreneurship, innovation and the opportunities that all of these create for

women. The Karachi-based social enterprise CIRCLE is holding the countrywide finals on August 19th, where young women will compete for a chance to take their startups to the global stage of the competition in China.

Sidra Qasim, a young entrepreneur and Co-Founder of Markhor, is an excellent example of a successful female-led entrepreneur emerging in Pakistan. Her business originated from Okara where Qasim takes advantage of indigenous talent to provide customers with premium quality, handcrafted leather shoes. The company is built to international standards and has found a market for its products outside of Pakistan. They managed to raise a whopping \$107,000 through a Kickstarter campaign. Despite an initial lull in their business, Qasim managed to create an international product and brand. She went on to get incubated, and today delivers products to hundreds of customers in over 30 countries.

We as a society need to emphasize success stories, especially when it comes to female entrepreneurs, and build cases to further entrepreneurial motivation among Pakistan's youth. The resilience necessary to succeed in this environment makes Pakistan's entrepreneurs that much stronger.



4

SMASHING
STEREOTYPES:
THE PAKISTANI WOMAN



SMASHING STEREOTYPES: THE PAKISTANI WOMAN

Sehar Tariq

If you happen to be born a woman in Pakistan, the odds will be against you. There is a 70 to 90 per cent chance that you will face some form of violence and abuse in your life. There's a 46 per cent chance that you will never attend school and an 81 per cent chance that you will never participate in the formal workforce and earn an income for yourself. Yet in the seventy years since its inception, Pakistani women have been succeeding despite these odds.

Pakistani women have brought home the Nobel Peace Prize and Oscars. A woman has been Head of State and despite constituting only 22 per cent of the total membership of the National Assembly, women have been responsible for nearly half of all parliamentary business conducted at the national and provincial levels in the last four years. Women are CEOs of major banks and run some of the most successful businesses in the country. Women are flying fighter jets and are combat ready in Pakistan's Air and Armed Forces. They write award-winning books and produce some of South Asia's most powerful literature. They have scaled the highest peaks in the country and hold their own against global competitors in the workforce, on the sports field and in classrooms and laboratories.

The resilience of the Pakistani woman despite all odds has been one of the most powerful yet underappreciated trends of recent decades. Critics have dismissed this as the story of a few urban centers and the result of the privileges enjoyed by the few. While there is no denying that class privilege helps many women overcome cultural barriers, there is also no denying the fact that women have been contributing silently to Pakistan's economy, politics and culture since 1947. But there is a deeper change afoot. Since 1980, the fertility rates have been on a steady decline and have now almost halved. Between 2000 and 2015, school enrollment for girls went up by 20 per cent, and the literacy rate for young women (those between the ages of 15 to 24) has risen almost 24 per cent. (Enrollment for boys has increased by 9.5 per cent and the literacy rate for young men increased at 13 per cent during the same period). Women's labour force participation has been on a slow but steady increase since 2001 as well. As women gain greater agency over their bodies and health and are given access to education and technology, they are working to transform their own lives and their communities. The positive impact of increasing female education and financial independence are globally established facts. And Pakistan is no different. We are already seeing signs of this. In major urban centers, we see women joining the workforce in not just larger numbers but also in more diverse sectors. Gone are the days when being a teacher, doctor or nurse was the clichéd profession of choice for women. You can now see girls standing confidently behind service counters at major retail outlets, working the fryers at fast food chains, managing stock and inventory at stores, running departments at corporations, managing their own businesses from home providing a range of services and now even taking up careers traditionally thought to be meant only for men or could only be dared to be done by women in the elite segments of society.

As Pakistani women step out into the world and excel at what they do, they blaze a trail for those looking up to them to follow. The ripple effect of one girl going to work in the nearest city and support her family financially is substantial for other girls in the community. As economic growth, education and technology open up new possibilities, the Pakistani woman is not afraid to take them and make the most of them despite the challenges they entail. Despite being beaten, burnt, threatened with acid, or murder in the name of honor, women continue to go about the business of improving their own lives and the lives of their communities. The Pakistani woman has proven her mettle in the last 70 years as a formidable power and agent of change at home and abroad. If

Pakistan is the world's bravest and most resilient nation, its women are the epitome of that courage and grace. And if Pakistan wants to accelerate the pace of its development and growth, investing in the protection, education and financial empowerment of its most resilient and capable citizens will be its wisest investment.



5

THE RIGHT TO
PUBLIC SPACE



THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC SPACE

Sadia Khatri

My 13 year old sister and I play a game when we commute in Karachi. I count the number of men I see in public spaces, and she counts women and transgender folks. Our agreed rule is that the person must be interacting with the street in some way; walking, hanging out at a khokha, driving an open vehicle. So people sitting in cars or driving them don't count.

Over time our playful experiment has led to an alarming ratio: for every fifteen men in public space, we see perhaps one woman. It isn't surprising.

In Karachi, most of the women navigating public spaces are poor, there out of necessity rather than pleasure. Meanwhile, men across class do not think twice before going outside for some air, or stopping by their neighbourhood dhaba to catch up with their friends.

When it comes to women, we exist in public spaces only when we have an assigned purpose (shopping, waiting by a restaurant entrance for a Careem, commuting for a job). On the rare occasion that we are outside for pleasure – in a park, in an open restaurant, at Sea View – we are rarely alone and have our male guardians with us. Upper and middle class women are particularly adept at moving between boxes quickly. We avoid any unnecessary interactions with the street, we do not linger, we prefer the confines of our secure private cars and our expensive coffee shops.

Where are the loiterers, the walkers, the wanderers? The women who take to the streets without a purpose in mind, the ones who, like men, do not fear the city?

The politics of respectability tell me that such a woman does not exist in our world. When I express my desire to go out alone at night, my father says: girls from our kind of families don't do that. My friends say, people will think you are a prostitute. My mother says: why don't you take your brother along. In each of these situations, the implication is that a woman cannot experience the city on her own terms without risking judgement or harassment. That a woman wanting to experience the city on her own terms is asking for judgement and harassment.

Sharing these frustrations with other women, I realized I wasn't the only one wondering whether gender strips away one's right to her city. A project grew organically after some of us began posting photographs of ourselves in public spaces—having chai at a dhaba, reading in a park. Women from over the country began sending in submissions, holding triumphant cups of steaming tea in the mountains, posing next to a motorbike, riding a bicycle. The project – called 'Girls at Dhabas' – is now a growing, real-time archive of women's interaction with public spaces, photographs and writings chronicling our experience of the streets.

We are often told that a woman's access to public space is a petty, trivial concern. For example, what does women's right to sip tea on the roadside have to do with 'bigger' feminist concerns? In fact, everything: public spaces affect everything from our autonomy to our sanity.

In a world where women's pleasure is dictated and curated by society, the trivial joy of roaming the city on one's whims is a radical way of asserting control over our bodies. On a more 'practical' plane, financial independence is impossible without freedom of mobility, since not everyone has drivers to parcel them around. Imagine if women in Karachi and Lahore drove motorbikes, rickshaws, taxis – how

many more would be earning.

But in urban Pakistan, women's mobility is restricted and surveilled under the guise of safety. We are told to stay in private spaces with the fear that 'something might happen to us', a euphemism for sexual assault. While the city is built up as a site of fear, statistically, most physical violence against women is done in private spaces, by a family member or a friend. A public-private divide along gendered lines only isolates and affirms private spaces as sites of violence.

Yes, there is harassment on the streets, but Pakistani women should not clamp it down by locking themselves inside thicker walls. The incredulous looks and lecherous gazes will end only once we are a common sight on the streets, as expected as a hawker or a tree. It is important to imagine a city where this is true, where women are part of ordinary street scenes. A city where we do not side-saddle on motorbikes, we lounge on sidewalks as men do.

When my sister looks upon this city – even if it is a curated echo chamber – what changes? In this city, there are as many women on the streets as men. We are part of the streetscape, which means our presence does not meet judgement or disapproval. We do not fear the 'common' man, the one we are told will harass us the first chance he gets, because our safety is assumed. It can be taken for granted. In this city we do not navigate our routes out of fear; we do not worry about the length of our dupattas.

In this city we occupy dhabas and parks with the same confidence and comfort as men. We do not think twice about going down the street for a walk, or to buy a pack of cigarettes from the corner store. In this city, we define our relationship with our streets on our own terms.

But most importantly, because we are not carefully watched over, in this city we find breathing spaces, the pockets that sustain our sanity, corners for the quiet joys of doing nothing.



6

WOMEN'S PLACE
IN THE HOUSE



WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE HOUSE

Marvi Sirmed

Greater representation of women in parliament has been a longstanding demand of the women's movement in Pakistan. In 2002, this demand was partially met when 17 per cent of seats in the National Assembly, Senate and Provincial Assemblies, and 33 per cent of seats in local governments were reserved for women under a constitutional amendment. Ever since, women have demonstrated both their resolve and ability on legislation and oversight through consistent parliamentary performance. However, despite their positive contributions, the media has routinely brought women members of the House under the microscope for the wrong reasons, finding more interest in their sartorial choices and the way they chose to carry themselves.

The democratic transition of 2008 changed the fabric of women's representation considerably, with many political workers winning seats in both houses of Parliament. Many of these women parliamentarians had either been a part of the women's movement or had been associated with it. During the 13th National Assembly, they resolved to work together across the aisle to ensure progress on issues relevant to women and marginalized communities in Pakistan. However, politics surrounding gender relations that challenged the power apparatus of religious and political elite made it difficult for them to secure a united front.

The 14th National Assembly saw a withering off of women parliamentarians who had roots in the women's movement. Instead, Parliament reflected class-based selection of party candidates, even on the seats reserved for women. The modality of reserved seats makes women dependent on party leadership. Their representation is therefore often considered secondary in comparison to those who win seats in their constituencies through general elections. The dichotomy in the nature of their representation has therefore become an emerging challenge – a glass ceiling of sorts.

Women on reserved seats are routinely labelled as 'MPs without a constituency,' 'members without effort,' and 'MPs on charity seats'. Their contribution to Parliament, however large it may be, is routinely derided. The share of constituency development funds allocated to them is minuscule and their agency to speak out during debates is regularly undermined. The subtle bias of male members and often male dominated party leadership is reflected in their derogatory remarks about their female colleagues in the House. In addition, women are obliged to surrender their agency to political expediency, which is exacerbated by the fact that they are entirely dependent upon party leadership for their existence in Parliament.

Despite these enormous challenges, it is refreshing to see how women have participated in the business of the House(s) at the provincial and national level. Their performance as legislators, however, cannot be seen in isolation with the overall political culture under which they operate. The basic framework to objectively assess parliamentary performance includes three main elements. The first is the parliamentary culture which constrains or encourages democratic practices, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of parties, and leadership attitudes towards the treasury. The second is the institutional capacity of the legislature, which includes both the advantages and drawbacks of the political and administrative wings of Parliament. And lastly, the governance context, including Parliament's relationship with the executive branch of the state, citizens and civil society. Discrepancies in any of these factors would enervate the entire structure, system and status of the Parliament – directly affecting the performance of its members. It goes without saying that in a patriarchal society, this overall institutional weakness would reflect particularly negatively on the performance of women in Parliament. Quantitative data though, suggests that women have tried their best to swim against the tide.

In the National Assembly, there are 60 reserved seats for women. Nine women members have come to the House through direct electoral competition. Of 342 members of the lower house of the Parliament, women make 20 per cent of the entire House. Yet, women's contribution in the total business of the House has remained at 58 per cent, 44 per cent and 38 per cent in the first, second and third year of the current National Assembly. Even historically, data over the last 15 years demonstrates that women's contribution to the total business of the house was 50 per cent during the 12th Assembly, and increased as much as 62 per cent during the 13th Assembly. This demonstrates that since the induction of women in greater numbers, their contributions have consistently remained greater than their representative numbers in Parliament.

Orders of business of the House fall under four main categories: legislation, executive's oversight, representation of the citizens and budget scrutiny. Tools available to ensure these parliamentary functions include resolutions, motions, Calling Attention Notices (CANs), Points of Order (PoOs), and Private Members Bills (PMBs) amongst others. In all these categories, the percentage of concerns and motions raised by women have consistently exceeded the percentage of their seats since 2002. It is unfortunate that these contributions are routinely ignored, and at times deliberately overlooked by both the media and civil society.

What is of concern is the declining participation of women legislators in the business of the House over the past three years. This gradual decline speaks to the shrinking space for women parliamentarians. One reason for this decline is the fraying of women's camaraderie along party lines due to increasingly entrenched, diverging and often vitiated party positions. However, an increasingly patriarchal executive branch and male dominated party structures have also been responsible for pushing women away from legislative contribution.

In order to ensure women are provided the necessary resources and platforms in Parliament, political parties should move away from tokenism and open themselves up to the idea of women in leadership positions at all intra-party forums. A constitutional amendment could assist in reviewing the model used to fill reserved seats. Not only should the list system be eliminated, but parties should voluntarily observe the gender-based legislative quota by giving tickets to more women to contest elections on general seats. Preliminary results of 2017 Census show women constituting 49 per cent of Pakistan's population. Therefore, at a minimum, 33 per cent tickets allocated for general elections should be reserved for women. As of now, male political leadership have mutually agreed that women need not be allocated more than 5 per cent of tickets to contest general elections. This is testament to the lack of recognition given to the consistent and progressively positive contributions made by women legislators over the last decade and a half.

Today, the system of patronage associated with reserved lists threatens both the inclusion of women in the business of the House, as well as the quality of women's representation. To ensure that women's political space is representative, inclusive, and their voices are heard, political parties must ensure that their women workers are given opportunities to represent constituencies through general elections. Pakistan's demographic diversity must be reflected in our democratic institutions.



7

HIGH DRAMA:
RETROGRESSIVE
FICTIONS AND PAKISTANI
SOAPS



HIGH DRAMA: RETROGRESSIVE FICTIONS AND PAKISTANI SOAPS

Fifi Haroon

Soaps across the world survive on the echo effect of familiar stereotypes. This is not a phenomenon simply native to Pakistan – Indian soaps are wrapped in Kanjeevaram saris and family values, Brazilian telenovelas often feature women falling for richer men and facing issues relevant to “marrying up” in the world. Each culture reinforces its own set of values; and these are often evolving paradigms that diversify with socio-political circumstances, advertiser expectations and changing media proliferation.

Pakistanis across all classes are fascinated with home-grown drama serials. Though targeted primarily at middle class women, they feature female stars who are mainly from middle-upper to upper-class backgrounds, and are glamour icons for diverse audiences. Pakistani drama serials are watched at home and abroad with devout addiction. Channels such as Hum TV, GEO and ARY are featured as an opt-in in cable packages in various countries, in addition to their digital availability on platforms such as YouTube. While the buzz around the revival of Pakistani cinema is deafening, it is the Pakistani drama serial which has experienced a true renaissance over the last decade and allowed for the burgeoning of talent from actors to directors that have successfully transferred to the big screen. The industry’s resurgence from relative anonymity to a game changer in South Asian media has been phenomenal. In 2014, the industry magazine *Aurora*, estimated that the entertainment channels (mostly offering a daily diet of soaps) pull in about half the total advertising spend on television. With drama continuing to be the most watched format on television (TRPs are high across channels) the share could have only increased in the last three years.

This comeback by the industry is a positive development, as it means indigenous, locally created material for viewer consumption. Yet what is worrying is how deeply misogynistic many Pakistani soaps have become, and how they wilfully indoctrinate viewers with the narrowest of middle class morality in scripts now authored almost exclusively by a handful of writers. They write what they know,” explains actor Hina Bayat, who has played umpteen mother roles in Pakistani serials. “Most scriptwriters today are women who have never seen the inside of an office. In their real world working women don’t exist so they don’t write them into their fictional worlds either – except perhaps as negative characters or mothers who ignore their children.”

As its influence has widened over the last decade, Pakistani dramas have increasingly developed tropes and advocated social norms that form a guidebook to “correct” female behaviour. While there may be exceptions, “positive” behavioural patterns for female characters include submission to the greater good, silence above speaking out (except in sudden tirades) and a focus on marital and family life that tends to make women’s career choices appear insignificant or non-existent. The world of Pakistani soaps is now the home – and female characters rarely step out beyond it. In fact, endless scenes are framed around kitchens and bedrooms, which, as actor Zahid Ahmed points out, are now almost exclusively shot in rented houses. Whereas men leave and return, women are largely homebound. If female leads do venture out and work in public spaces – be it Sarah (Naveen Waqar) in Sarmad Khoosat’s ground-breaking magnum opus *Humsafar* (2011) or the mentally disturbed Jeena (Aisha Khan) in *Mann Mayal* (2016) – they are shown as seductresses trying to dismantle the extended family system. Meanwhile, simpering, dewy-faced heroines like Khirad (Mahira Khan in *Humsafar*) and Kashaf (Sana Saeed) in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012) suffer in obstinate silence or misguided stoicism.

Tears are plentiful. In fact, producers now claim that if you don’t show women crying, the drama will never garner the desired ratings. Add in a few pleading monologues on the prayer mat and there you have it – a success story. The Pakistani media has set the parameters of acceptable womanhood, and they are

stringent and disturbingly regressive. As actor Samia Mumtaz says, “they get women [who are] known to be strong in real life to play these downcast, crying roles.” It is almost as if they are being tempered and chastised in public view to handicap the impact of their off screen personae.

Most millennial Pakistanis grew up on a diet of Indian saas-bahu television serials rather than Pakistani television. The prolific rise of long running Indian melodramas in the early 2000s was unaffected by political borders. Earlier generations had been far more PTV focused with social dramas like *Khuda ki Basti* (1969) dominating the television landscape and garnering faithful audiences for realist fare. *Waris* (1980), a drama serial embedded in feudal conflict was so popular that it crossed over to China. Alongside these issue-focused dramas were the great female-led love stories of the times – serials like *Shehzori* (early 1970s) and *Kiran Kahani* (1973) mostly penned by Haseena Moin and inevitably featuring heroines trying to find the ground beneath their feet (and love). Even as early as *Kiran Kahani* (1973), the first episode of which opened with Moeen’s slightly confused but persevering female lead (played memorably by Roohi Bano), in the throes of a job interview. Moin was a singular force in television drama, writing a multiplicity of hit serials that famously left Pakistani streets deserted during telecast. While romance remained the main theme, Moin’s girls began to show grit, ambition and dedication to their career. Zara (Shehnaz Sheikh) of *Tanhaiyan* (1985) or Dr. Zoya (Marina Khan) in *Dhoop Kinarey* (1987) both learnt about responsibility as they learnt about love.

With the easy availability of Indian cable channels like Star Plus, Sony and later Colours, Pakistani dramas dwindled and lost prestige. The hiatus hurt the development of good screenwriters though some like Nurul Huda Shah, known for choosing political themes did shine through. At this point, Pakistani dramas lost much of their individuality, becoming weak low budget copies of the Indian prototype. While individual directors like Mehreen Jabbar continued to produce serials or long plays with strong female leads in the early 2000s, it was perhaps HUM TV’s *Humsafar* which catapulted Pakistani drama back into the mainstream. With an attractive star pairing and a melodramatic premise culled from Farhat Ishtiaq’s novel of the same name, the serial pulled audiences back to their TV sets in a way the Haseena Moin serials of yore had done. But this time round, the feminine ideal was long suffering and immobile. Writing in *Dawn*, blogger Sabahat Zakariya described the change: “The sad irony is that Haseena’s heroines challenged the status quo by being their bubbly, independent, [even] if hopelessly romantic selves. In comparison, the *Khirads* and *Sarajs* of today are a firm step backward. Today’s specimens perpetually shuffle from one tearjerker to another; their whole lives one long, painful dirge on the hazards of being a woman in a patriarchal world they have no interest in challenging or shaping.” Or if they do challenge the way things are going, it is normally seen as sullen and self-destructive (Mahira Khan again as Saba in *Bin Roye*, 2016), uncaring and ungrateful (Maya Ali in *Dayaar-e-Dil*, 2015) or manipulative and insidious (Atiqa Odho as the scheming mother-in-law in *Humsafar*). And yes, they are always reprimanded, made to apologise and ultimately look remarkably foolish. Or then, they dwindle into deep depression and kill themselves (Sarah in *Humsafar*).

So while these serials are ostensibly about women, they are better described as being about a certain kind of “prescribed” woman. She is a manifesto, writ large and beamed into people’s homes via television sets. Watching television is very different from other media. In Pakistani homes, it is usually done with your family or even while doing household chores. So in a sense, it insidiously creeps into the family. You are almost lulled into believing that these characters could exist outside the bounds of your television sets. Behavioural messages in television dramas are coordinated for family viewing and social norms woven into the script are witnessed as a group. A central concern then is to understand how these coded behaviours affect people’s belief systems and whether they can yield social and political outcomes. HUM TV’s Sultana Siddiqui, who directed *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2014) a drama about a couple from varying socio-economic backgrounds, tells me that “Wherever I went during the serial’s broadcast, women would approach me and tell me how much they loved the play, especially its lead female character. I want to bring my daughter up to be a *Kashaf* too they would tell me. Mothers

wanted their daughters to emulate the character.” (My emphasis). Interestingly, while Kashaf impressed viewers with an outward confidence and desire to educate herself, she is essentially a headstrong character who constantly makes moral judgements that later turn out to be erroneous. The serial concludes with Kashaf sheepishly returning to her husband to admit she misjudged him and falling back in line with being a good wife by bearing twins. So if television dramas can sometimes play an aspirational part in influencing social behaviours, what kind of norms are such dramas encouraging our young girls to aspire to?

Despite the rise of social media in recent years, Pakistan’s dominant media continues to be television. Today, most television networks have channels particular to genres such as Geo Kahani which is entirely reserved for drama serials. The field research I commissioned during my stint as BBC Media Action’s Project Director for Pakistan (2012-2014) suggests that drama is the most popular genre for both men and women (though marginally more popular with women). This means that it is not just women who are possibly absorbing social behavioural recommendations from television drama serials. Men too, are observing what it is to be a man in Pakistani society, and of course what they can expect from the women in their lives and homes. So when a model (Saba Qamar) marries a politician (Zahid Ahmed) on the basis of a challenge thrown out on a TV talk show in Besharm (2016), it perpetuates the silliness of women in making life changing decisions despite being relatively independent and financially self-sufficient.

There are two ways that media can potentially affect beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in society. One of these is an individual or direct effect where media can introduce new norms or entrench existing notions as normative, in what Della Vigna and Gentzkow (2010) call the “persuasive” model. Both Mackie (1996) and Chwe (2001) contend that the provision of public information can enhance coordination of that norm as it is perceived as public knowledge. Eric Arias (2016) speaks about how the media’s public method of delivery helps viewers form an understanding of their shared beliefs. Miller, Monin and Prentice (2000) argue that “attempts to change public behaviours by changing private attitudes will not be effective unless some effort is also made to bridge the boundary between the public and the private.” Thus, when families and neighbours view television dramas together (quite common in Pakistani homes and mohallas) they may collectively absorb the moral tropes inherent in it. It is the persuasiveness of the story and its inbuilt logic mechanism that instils this shared experience into their perception of what the moral standards of behaviour are. This is why Pakistani drama serials can both be dangerous – and potentially a way to update norms. They could, potentially, get people to adapt their notions on the basis of widely shared beliefs of how people ought to behave in a given situation.

Unfortunately until Udaari (2016), the drama serials of the last ten years have largely reinforced conservative notions of female morality and extolled suffering within the family context as virtuous. In many ways, this thinking remains entrenched across the networks. Dramas continue to pursue retrogressive ideals that are constantly reinforcing the worst of what people may have a general belief in – but seeing it on your television screen validates it as a norm. So Pakistani dramas normalise women pitted against each other as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, as ‘nand’ scheming against ‘bhabi,’ as office colleague seducing a man away from his wife. Female support systems are almost written out of stories. A play in which women support women like Mehreen Jabbar’s ‘Spenta, Mary aur Zubeida’ (2000) where three older women live together and provide refuge to women escaping violent husbands, would almost certainly find no takers among channel drama heads today.

Writing recently in The Hindu, Yamuna Matheswaran talks about the “glorification of misery” in TV dramas across the border. “The South Indian television serial, which showcases storylines predominated by domestic conflict resolution, sets up and perhaps perpetuates moral binaries in a world sorely in need of nuance.” Take out the ‘perhaps’ and she could be describing Pakistani drama

serials. Our soap operas feature black and white interpretations of social mores which reinforce existing notions. When these recommendations feature repeatedly on the television screen regardless of which channel you switch to, they are further cemented into the social fabric. When you consistently show women suffering in 39 out of 40 episodes with a brief rejuvenating finale, it is the crying woman rather than the triumphant woman who holds your attention. Actor Aamina Sheikh bemoaned the character she played in the serial *Pakeezah* (2016): “The effect of the final episode is short lived. What people remember is the crying woman, the aggrieved woman, the woman who is being negated for 39 episodes. That image has the lasting impact.”

I am not a conspiracy theorist but it needs to be asked – why are our television channels doing this? Actor Zahid Ahmed argues that as serials are targeted towards middle-class housewives, they will be geared to their moral and value systems. “The fact is that the sponsors who fund these plays want the kind of material that will appeal to these women,” he says. But as Matheswaran crucially asks: “At what point does it stop being a case of art imitating life and become life imitating art?” I refuse to believe that advertisers of household products are specifically asking for conservative outlooks in dramas. What they may be asking for is relatability – but how channel drama heads and scriptwriters interpret and navigate this is key. They certainly shouldn’t be asking for violence against women, high degrees of infidelity from men that women are forced to accept, or for women to have no ambition or aspirations. In any case should a cooking oil or detergent be allowed to determine our creative output or our moral values?

Drama serials like *Udaari* and *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (2017) are proof that when Pakistani television dramas introduce fresh themes persuasively or try to suggest new possible behaviours to Pakistani audiences, they are able to respond with empathy. The interaction may result in modified behaviour or even a shift of norms among viewers compared to those who may not have viewed the serial. *Baaghi* (2017), based on Qandeel Baloch’s meteoric rise to fame and subsequent murder, is portrayed more as a cautionary tale for young women than a relatable story of a woman who had both strengths and weaknesses and was above all her own immaculate conception. Speaking to the *Express Tribune*, its writer Shazia Khan said “It is about the men who slammed all doors of dignified living to her. Men, who forced her to exist on her charms alone. Men, who feverishly slammed her after having finished watching her latest video on Instagram.” Baloch, perhaps the most unapologetic, fierce presence in social media in recent times is reduced to a man-made creation and stripped of all agency. “As responsible citizens, we need to learn from her tale, accept her as a part of our fabric and not try to jostle her away from our collective conscience because who knows... next time it could be someone closer to you, or you,” Khan goes on. This kind of thinking sounds persuasive, but is actually apologist. It is smug at taking on a contentious topic, but would even make Madonna’s life story into a morality fable. A self-made maverick who ingeniously reinvented herself is defined in one dimensional terms, a girl gone wrong. Well-meaning yes, but in final analysis, watch out or your girls might be inspired.

Clearly if drama for development works, it can be used to create awareness and to encourage tolerance and open-mindedness. But when drama is used to restrict women’s ambitions beyond the home and hearth, when it glorifies misery and martyrdom consistently and when it pitches women against women rather than showing examples of female community building, it becomes a platform for retrogressive behaviour normalised for mass audiences. It is media validating retrogressive belief systems; the echo chamber effect across channels cementing female stereotypes. So why do female actors on television accept these roles? “When roles disagree with my own Feminist principles I turn them down,” reveals Samia Mumtaz, “but not everyone can do that and we can’t afford to do it every time. Acting is a livelihood and these are the parts that are on offer.”

Speaking at the Karachi Literary Festival Hina Bayat asked a leading question of two media leaders also on the same panel (Sultana Siddiqui of Hum TV and Seema Tahir of TV One): “When will it be that Hina Bayat

REFERENCES:

- [1] Fifi Haroon interviews Hina Bayat for BBC Urdu (19 March 2017), Available at <http://www.bbc.com/urdu/media-39322506>
- [2] Fifi Haroon interviews Samia Mumtaz for BBC Urdu (30 October 2016), Available at <http://www.bbc.com/urdu/entertainment-37817887>
- [3] Sabahat Zakariya, Drama Seriels: Golden Age? Dawn Blogs (3 March 2012) Available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/699862>
- [4] Fifi Haroon interviews Sultana Siddiqui for BBC Urdu (26 January 2015), Available at http://www.bbc.com/urdu/multimedia/2015/01/150125_sultana_siddiqui_oak_drama_india_zs
- [5] DellaVigna, S. and Gentzkow, M. (2010). Persuasion: Empirical Evidence. Annual Review of Economic. Vol 2 p.643-669.
- [6] Miller, D. T., Monin, B., & Prentice, D. A. (2000). Pluralistic ignorance and inconsistency between private attitudes and public behaviors. Applied Social Research. p. 95-113. Mahwah, NJ.
- [7] Mattheswaran, Yamuna. Soap Operas and the Glorification of Misery. The Hindu (5 May 2017) Available at <http://www.thehindu.com/thread/arts-culture-society/soap-operas-and-the-glorification-of-misery/article18377821.ece>
- [8] Fifi Haroon interviews Aamina Sheikh for BBC Urdu (24 April 2016). Available at http://www.bbc.com/urdu/multimedia/2016/04/160424_aamina_sheikh_int_sq
- [9] Fifi Haroon interviews Zahid Ahmed for BBC Urdu (29 January 2017). Available at <http://www.bbc.com/urdu/entertainment-38789018>
- [10] Mattheswaran, Y. (2017)
- [11] Khan, Shazia. Baaghi: why did I write Qandeel Baloch's story? Express Tribune (24 June 2017) Available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1443991/baaghi-write-qandeel-balochs-story/>
- [12] Fifi Haroon interviews Samia Mumtaz for BBC Urdu (30 October 2016), Available at <http://www.bbc.com/urdu/entertainment-37817887>



ENDANGERED
AT HOME:

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND
PROVINCIAL LEGISLATION



ENDANGERED AT HOME: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND PROVINCIAL LEGISLATION

Maliha Zia

The schism between Pakistan's legislation and social realities is perhaps best reflected by domestic violence. It would be reasonable to assume that the enactment of legislation against domestic violence in three provinces, and the tabling of a bill in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, demonstrates a steady decline in both the tolerance of, and social sanction for violence at home. But daily occurrences of violence against women and the purposeful vagueness in language of domestic violence legislation betrays another truth.

Unfortunately, domestic violence remains a politically divisive issue in Pakistan. This divisiveness accompanied by a diversion in views on what constitutes domestic violence is best represented by the differing language and definition of domestic violence in each provincial law. In Sindh, it is recognized as a crime with criminal penalties. In Balochistan and Punjab, a legal definition is provided by law but it stops short of criminalizing violence at home, instead choosing to focus on protection remedies. In the case of Punjab, the province has gone one step ahead to focus on improved response mechanisms.

The proposed KP legislation is the most controversial thus far, stating under Section 22 that "nothing in this Act applies to corrective measures taken by parents or spouses within the constraints of the injunction of Islam, as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah." Whilst in name the draft law purports to create an offence of domestic violence, in practice it gives legal cover to such acts of violence if they are deemed to have been "corrective measures" – a term not defined by law. This raises a basic question. What then defines domestic violence in the first place?

As a result, few, if any cases, have been filed under respective laws. Commonly, cases of violence result in divorce without any formal criminal charges. Society still fails to see it as an offence unless serious or grievous harm or hurt is evident. Worse still, in many cases domestic violence is considered a norm, often shifting the onus of decision making onto the victim to decide whether or not she can put up with it.

The unwillingness of state institutions in unpacking and implementing the law at the local level, coupled with the society's social sanction raises serious questions about the effectiveness of legislation in the face of societal resistance.

No real efforts have been made to implement existing laws. Sindh and Balochistan, which are meant to form protection committees and appoint relevant officials, have yet to do so. One of the first court cases under the Sindh law has only recently been initiated. Even there, the judge has struggled to understand the object of the law and concepts behind it. It would seem that the judiciary too has made little effort in both understanding the law and as a result, ensuring its effective implementation.

However, despite the challenges faced in implementation, these new laws against violence at home have freed public discourse on a hitherto taboo subject, often limited to select groups of activists and rights advocates. This discourse is welcome as a starting point towards creating positive change even though the text of the law on its own, and as the only step in curbing violence, is insufficient and ineffective.

It is essential to go back to the basics and work towards addressing issues of the public/private divide, women's agency and their right of life, security and dignity. "Corrective measures" and other such approaches must be challenged within the social framework alongside the legal.

Working with civil society is essential in order to recognize and identify domestic violence as an

anomaly. The day to day violence and its impact must be enunciated and identified. The issue must be seen as a core concern from within. Key stakeholders such as the police and judges must also understand the issue as it stands. These stakeholders are often the first point of contact and play a crucial role in supporting the victims. Thus, “understanding the issue” includes not just being able to identify it, but also recognizing the short and long term impacts of it on direct and indirect victims. They must also recognize the impact of their own interventions or lack thereof. For example, the danger they place a woman in if they mediate the matter and proceed to send her home with her husband.

Domestic violence cannot be stopped with the passage of a law. It requires a long term multifaceted approach which addresses social norms and attitudes while also working with justice actors to ensure adequate response. Neither the State nor civil society should be allowed to rest on the laurels that a law has been passed. The government must be challenged for its inaction in taking further steps beyond merely passing a law, and civil society must be challenged for not playing an effective enough role in the response to this lethargy of the State.

