

Pakistan: Motorcycle feminism and all that drag

Celebrating Gender diversity – Connecting Women Struggles

Saturday 9 March 2013, by [HASAN Fakhra](#) (Date first published: 5 March 2013).

Women in Struggle for Empowerment (WISE) and “Drag It to the Top” jointly organized a seminar cum discussion, Tuesday 5th March, on gender diversity and women’s human rights issues as a precursor to the International Women’s Day celebrations that officially begin on the 8th of March 2013.

The seminar “Celebrating Gender diversity –Connecting Women Struggles” was held at the Shirkat Gah conference hall, and mostly women activist groups attended it from marginalized rural areas of Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan who were nestled with the urbanized socialists, academics, writers, authors, artists and journalists.

Among main speakers were Bushra Khaliq, Executive Director WISE, Fakhra Hassan, Founder Director “Drag It to the Top”, Ms. Krishna from Daman, Aabidah Ali, Muaaz Ali and Hashim Bin Rashid.

Addressing the seminar Krishna, a young feminist from Hyderabad- working closely with the women of her community to confront sexual harassment; talked about human rights violations against women rights, particularly in Sindh province. She said, “Forced conversion of Hindu girls and sexual violence, though mutually exclusive, do not imply prejudice towards Hindu girls only”. In Sindh, women face sexual harassment on almost daily basis under the oppressor-worker relationship that they are bound to maintain in order to feed their families.

There have been times when we couldn’t do anything about them, even when the sexual harassment took the form of rape, forced marriage,” she said, adding that the feudal system is overtly dominant in Sindh, so it is an uphill climb for us but we are committed to continue our efforts fearlessly,” Krishna asserted.

Speaking on the occasion, Fakhra explained the idea of Drag to an audience of women, mostly for whom the idea was very new. She said the very term drag even for most urban people brings up the idea of smoking, which is quite interesting but not accurate. “A woman who is perceived masculine by society will have and will face numerous difficulties and obstacles including discrimination at the workplace, physical and sexual violence in the form of forced feminization and corrective rape too when worse comes to worst,” she added. “Above everything else, we are human beings first, engaged in a common battle against colonial oppression,” she emphasized.

Bushra Khaliq highlighting the glimpses of women struggles in Pakistan, said women’s political and social movements have been torchbearers of human rights and gender justice. The young women activists must be organically linked to those historical movements, particularly against dictators. She urged the need to highlight micro level struggles of women in daily life. Taking note of some important women struggles, she opined that peasant women, brick kiln women, fisherfolk women, home-based women workers, minority women and domestic maids must be united. “Missing dots

between these smaller level struggles should be linked to transform them into grand women rights movement in Pakistan.” She said.

Young Pharmacy graduate Muaaz Ali said that debate on gender-class relations started evolving in the late 18th and early 19th century, which is the period when feminism began to take root in the West. “Feminism is not new to Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures – home to Sufism and its tenets of love and tolerance,” Muaaz speculated. “Gender is fluid and in order to fully understand it, we should try to envision ourselves engaged in each other’s personal struggles to know and to understand the feeling of being the other person and stand with them in solidarity. That for me is what manhood is really about – giving precedence to equality over privilege,” he asserted.

Aabidah Ali – an architect by profession re-inforcing concerns and views on women’s rights, talked about the evolution of domestic architecture and female spaces in Pakistani society. “The common problem with architects is that they usually ignore women’s needs in designing living spaces. In a typical architectural mind set, women are envisioned as people who are meant to occupy or live in that space, as consumers. They are the passive participants in the household,” she said. “We need women like Zeynep Fadillioglu[1] who is the first female architect in Turkey, a country similar to Pakistan in terms of dark conditions for women’s rights, to design a mosque where men and women share the same floor spaces as opposed to traditional mosques where women are secluded from experiencing the essence of mosque culture at the same level as men,” she said.

Renowned socialist, journalist and chair of Awami Workers Party, Hashim Bin Rashid linked the commodification of women to capitalist agendas of advertising agencies and media outlets in Pakistan. “What makes a woman happy and complete, when you watch those advertisements?” He asked. An efficient homemaker, woman who knows how to keep her mother-in-law and husband happy, a submissive daughter and a responsible mother, were some of the immediate responses.

The participants were shared a training opportunity for women to learn to ride motorcycles. Nevertheless, the idea and training was well-received and refreshing news for aspiring women bikers in Sindh. At the end of the seminar, it was also learnt that 65% of the participants in the seminar don’t have access to the internet. The need for provision of internet training was greatly felt and everyone came to a unanimous conclusion that one of the best ways to tackle harassment is to maintain visibility on the Internet and use social media for outreach and information sharing.

Fakhra Hasan
