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## **Pakistan: Tahira Mazhar Ali's death a profound loss to many - "She carried on her activism for labour and women's rights for over 60 years"**

Monday 6 April 2015, by [JALIL Xari](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2015).

LAHORE: Veteran leader of the left movement, Tahira Mazhar Ali, passed away on Monday. Though she had been unwell for some time, her death has been met with a profound sense of loss by those who knew her.

Born in Lahore in a prominent family, Tahira's father was Sir Sikander Hayat Khan, the prime minister of united Punjab from 1937 to 1942, while her maternal grandfather was Nawab Muzaffar Ali Khan, a prominent landlord of Punjab. She studied at Queen Mary School in Lahore and later married Mazhar Ali Khan at the age of 16. Marrying a student leader may have been a turning point in her life and her political life began after marriage.

Being born in an affluent family did not deter her from struggling for the rights of the marginalised. She carried on her activism for labour and women's rights for over 60 years.

It was Tahira who for the first time in Pakistan observed the International Women's Day publicly, where it was openly demanded that women be given their equal status and their rights be established. When it came to fighting for human rights, Tahira was unbending and her marked resistance made her a threat to the establishment.

In 1950, the Democratic Women's Association (DWA) was formed and led by Tahira. It is considered the country's first women's rights organisation that ran with the support of the Communist Party, something that Tahira was proud of, often comparing it to internationally run organisations today. Other members of the DWA included Hajra Masood, Khadija Omar, Amatul Rehman and Alys Faiz. Its work was based in the grassroots in small neighbourhoods and involved mobilisation of women and workers.

It is because of her work in this regard that Tahira is seen as one of the greatest women of the subcontinent. Those who knew her well recall her active role in protests and rallies.

Amid tears, her long-time colleague and close friend 'Baji' Naseem Ashraf Malik recalled Tahira and said she was "history personified".

"I cannot even begin to explain her greatness," she said. "All that I have learnt about activism has been taught by her. Inspired by her, we used to follow her through the streets of Lahore holding brooms and sweeping neighbourhoods. When the women who lived there used to see us, Tahira used to explain to them about cleanliness and made them aware of so many other things too."

Baji Naseem adds that Tahira was not just an activist for the working class and women — she was

someone who actually worked with the masses.

“Unlike many others, she never thought it was beneath her to sit next to workers in their homes and eat with them,” said Baji Naseem. “She had so much empathy within her. But at the same time, she was outspoken, confident and brave and nothing could deter her.”

She said no other woman had done as much as Tahira had for women’s rights in Pakistan. It is because of this that she has been recognised in the subcontinent as a great woman of Punjabi origin. Tahira also led fierce resistance against dictatorship, especially under the Ayub and Zia regimes.

In the 1960s, Ayub Khan banned the DWA for its stance on his rule. Later, during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s regime, though there was more freedom of movement and expression, the DWA was restrained from inviting Indian women activists to celebrate the International Women’s Day here. After further restrictions on the association during Gen Zia’s reign, these leading women’s rights activists formed the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) as a new resistance movement. Zia’s oppressive regime and controversies such as the Hudood laws compelled the formation of WAF in 1981.

“Tahira was indeed a true activist,” remembers I.A. Rehman. “She joined the Communist Party at a very young age and since then never once stepped back from the work she was doing. After the Partition too she worked on peace and was on the peace committee between India and Pakistan.”

He described her as a very active political person who even participated in rallies and protests in her old age. She remained a member of the Central Working Committee of the National Workers Party. But though she remained strong inside, outwardly Tahira Mazhar Ali’s health began to turn fragile, especially after she suffered a stroke.

On Monday, March 23, she passed away at her house in Shah Jamal, Lahore.

Tahira Mazhar leaves behind a daughter, Tauseef Hyat, and two sons, Tariq Ali, a renowned writer, and Mahir Ali, a journalist in Australia.

Her funeral will be held at 9.30am on Tuesday at House No 7, Street 3, Shah Jamal, Lahore.

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**P.S.**

\* “Tahira Mazhar Ali’s death a profound loss to many”. Published in Dawn March 24<sup>th</sup> , 2015.

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