

Feminist lawyers of South Asia rally to aid of #MeToo survivors

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Facing down intimidation, women all over this traditional region are speaking out about sexual harassment and violence.

Ali Zafar is famed across South Asia for his pop music, romantic comedies and even the occasional toothpaste advert. But last weekend he gave a particularly emotional performance on Pakistani television, tears welling in his eyes as he spoke of the effect sexual harassment allegations has had on his life. For the past year, the actor and musician has been embroiled in the country's most high-profile [#MeToo](#) case: his initial accuser was the actress and singer Meesha Shafi.

Last April she issued a statement claiming that Zafar had sexually harassed her "on more than one occasion". He responded by "categorically denying" the allegations and promising to sue.

The stars have since been locked in a legal battle - including a defamation suit for 1bn rupees (£5.4m) in damages, which led to the courts ordering Shafi to abstain from making any further "negative remarks" against Zafar. Last weekend, after Zafar's television appearance, Shafi's lawyer, Nighat Dad, [tweeted her verdict](#): "If anyone has earned the right to cry today, it's thousands of survivors around us who were forced to watch a privileged man accused of sexual harassment and whine."

"Lots of younger women have got so much courage, and started talking about their experiences."

- Nighat Dad, lawyer

Since the #MeToo movement gathered pace in October 2017, attitudes to sexual harassment and abuse have shifted in many parts of the world. [Across South Asia, in countries where local feminists decry conservative and patriarchal attitudes](#), campaigners have noted a marked increase in the number of women speaking out.

And, as the *Observer* found on a recent visit to India, Pakistan and [Bangladesh](#), a newly emboldened cohort of female lawyers are rallying to offer their support to survivors. One of the most prominent is Dad.

"Lots of younger women have gotten so much courage and have started talking about their own experiences," she said during a recent interview over chips and coffee in Lahore. In the wake of Shafi's accusations, more women came out against Zafar and other men, whether celebrities or not. As one of the country's foremost feminist lawyers, Dad found her inbox full of stories from women asking for help. "I knew something had to be done," she said, "and I asked myself how lawyers wanting to work on this issue could get together and do something to support these women collectively."

In January, along with her small team at Lahore-based NGO the [Digital Rights Foundation](#), Dad

launched an online portal for women to access pro-bono legal support for cases of sexual harassment and violence. Dad decided the project should be self-sustaining rather than funded by foreign donors because “agencies always have their own aims and objectives”, and because “when the money ends, the initiative ends”. The site is called [Ab Aur Nahin](#) - “Time’s Up” in Urdu. “We’re telling these people that enough is enough,” said Dad. “We’re taking charge of this issue.”

Now 50 lawyers are registered on the site, 30 of them women. “It’s amazing because there are so few female litigators in [Pakistan](#),” said Dad. “Or if there are women lawyers, they don’t go to the courts because of the misogynistic environment.”

So far, the network of lawyers has supported 15 women with everything from writing statements to legal representation and advice on responding when accused men “slap back with defamation suits”.

“The site is targeted at young women,” said Dad. “They are using online spaces to speak up, and mostly don’t want their families involved because there’s still shame attached to being a survivor.” In many cases, she said, young women fear their studies or work will be compromised if they tell their families about an incident.

Like Dad, Indian lawyer Rutuja Shinde sought feminist legal support on Twitter in the wake of #MeToo. When the movement took off in the country last October, Shinde had “a rough day” in her all-male office.

“I was just reading these tweets - there was one woman, then 10, then 100 - it was overwhelming,” she said. “I decided there was no point in just reading tweets and getting angry. I should put my anger to some use.”

Shinde tweeted: “Dear women out there, I don’t know if I can do much but I want to help. If any woman in the jurisdiction of Bombay high court has faced sexual harassment at the workplace and wants to sue, please contact me.”

She was inundated with pleas for support and offers of free assistance from lawyers and mental health practitioners. A few days later she shared a Google doc of lawyers’ contact details. There are more than 80 names on the list, mostly women. “I’m a bit unsure when I put someone in touch with a man,” said Shinde. “I don’t want survivors to ever have their experiences minimised.”

Shinde says that managing the project is “a lot of labour”, but that she feels she should work for free, because she comes from “a privileged section of society”.

She has had hundreds of women contacting her, of all social classes. “On weekends, I sit and reply to everyone and tell them what they can do, the steps they can take,” she said. She’s also endured trolling from self-declared men’s rights activists. “First they were just like: ‘You hate all men! Feminazi!’” she said, “and then, ‘You must hate your father!’” Shinde found humour a helpful response: “I was like, ‘Listen, my father also hates men, okay?’” Nowadays, she’s given up replying to trolls for the most part. “You can’t educate everyone,” she said. “If you have the internet, go and educate yourself instead of trolling me.”

Shinde is a firm believer that the women’s movement has to be sustained by human connection offline, too. For this reason, she’s started post-#MeToo meetups, where women congregate in a public space to share their experiences, or simply to be together. “We just take bedsheets and sit there - no men, no journalists,” she said. “It’s very cathartic to just say what happened to you; some people have been carrying the burden for years.”

In neighbouring Bangladesh, the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers’ Association has observed

the impact of the [#MeToo movement](#). Though it is still rare for women to speak publicly about sexual harassment and assault, BNWLA director Wahida Idris says that more women have been coming to them for support in recent years.

The BNWLA, founded in 1979, sees itself as a pioneer in legal responses to sexual harassment. In 2009, it filed a public interest litigation (PIL) in Bangladesh, and the resulting guidelines now serve as the legal directive on sexual harassment in the absence of a formal law. The guidelines define sexual harassment, and suggest awareness programmes to protect women in the workplace and public spaces.

They include “a wide range of offences that we never thought were offences”, said Fawzia Karim Firoze, president of BNWLA. “Even sending an SMS, even drawing a picture, even writing on a wall, even eve-teasing [a euphemism that is used throughout South Asia meaning the public sexual harassment or sexual assault of women].”

“Things have definitely changed since the PIL,” added Idris. “Men will now think twice - even the boss will think twice.”

Nevertheless, Firoze said: “Since the PIL, 10 years have passed, and few institutions are forming the sexual harassment committee that the guidelines propose.” In the past couple of years, though, she said “the drive to enforce the guidelines has gained momentum”.

“People have started talking much more about our judgement and guidelines,” said Firoze, “because the number of reported incidents of sexual harassment has increased.” She says the increase in public awareness that has come with #MeToo would not have been possible 10 years ago.

“Awareness programmes usually need funding,” she said, “and at that time the donors were not at all prepared to fund this kind of issue.”

Now, she says, foreign donors are flocking - but she’s anxious that “all of us should come together and do the work together.” As it is, she said, since #MeToo took off, “each and every organisation is rushing to get newly available funding.”

“They never even recognise we had this verdict 10 years ago,” she added. For this reason, the BNWLA went back to the courts this month with another PIL to improve the enforcement of the guidelines.

Speaking of the collective response of South Asian female lawyers to #MeToo, Shinde said: “Now there is a sisterhood to fall back on. Before, you used to think, ‘Who is going to believe me? Who is going to listen?’ But now, there are women listening - women who will help at every stage.”

This story is part of Bolly Lolly Dhally, a collaborative European Journalism Centre project platforming stories of women and feminism in the film industries of Pakistan, [India](#) and Bangladesh.”

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