

Pakistan: Too few good men

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THERE are good men in Pakistan. Somewhere sitting in some corner, perhaps a library or an office, are men who do not believe in being condescending and cruel, men who do not constantly interrupt women to insert their own thoughts or wishes or meaningless bluster. Somewhere there are men who would not be ashamed of a woman earning more than them, men who do not belittle them by cracking bawdy and sexist jokes, men who do not feel like lesser beings if they share in the housework, do half the dishes, half the cleaning, half the laundry, half the cooking. Somewhere undoubtedly are these gems that have really signed on to gender equality and have disavowed wholesale the toxic norms of a stubbornly patriarchal society.

A large section of men in Pakistan are ‘mean’. By ‘mean’, I am implying many things. On the roads they are rude to women drivers, in offices they grope and brush up and stare, insist on telling lewd jokes to make the women feel like they shouldn’t be there, like they are something less than a man can be. At home, they may be nice every once in a while; making eggs some Sunday morning or heating up food on a day their wife is ill. These gestures are supposed to be monumental, to be framed and fancied for years to come, particularly during moments when their right to be mean all the rest of the time is somehow in question. If they perform some kindness on a regular basis, say do the grocery shopping, or prepare tea in the morning, then they expect to be lauded for the rest of the week, and included immediately in the ranks of the “few good men” every Pakistani woman hopes to encounter.

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At the root of the meanness lies what psychiatrists have termed ‘toxic masculinity’ or the cultural maintenance of norms that entrench male dominance. Unsurprisingly, this sense of male entitlement can be witnessed everywhere in Pakistan. Widowed mothers have to defer to teenage sons in family decision-making, a wife must ask for permission for everything from working outside the home to visiting a friend. Men rule the streets, all public places belong to them, and all offices are created for them; of course, educational institutions are their domain too.

If women are permitted some small pathetic percentage of what belongs to men, they must remain ever apologetic, defer at all times to whatever man is present, sing the praises of fathers and brothers and husbands and generally act like they themselves don’t even exist or have any views or desires that contravene with those of the men around.

Naturally, since absolute power corrupts absolutely, this dominance has made the Pakistani male mean — an essential feature of Pakistani masculinity. The Pakistani male today may be educated, mouth the familiar phrases about being committed to women’s equality and having no issues with women working. Often, this is just for show.

Take, for instance, a situation of a family with three sons. The first two marry women who did not

want careers, who stay at home as mothers. When the third son marries a doctor, all sorts of promises are made regarding her future, the openness of the family, the importance of a career and such. Once the marriage parties are over and it's time for the dulhan to return to work, she comes home every evening to sour faces and sullen expressions. If the husband gets home before her, he texts her tens of times to make sure she knows that she has failed in that (apparently) crucial wifely duty of being there to greet him when he comes home from work, with the smile and pliant countenance that they require of their kind women. It is no surprise that within a few months the equality charade is over and done with, and the degree has been shelved with all the neatly wrapped clothes from the wedding.

Nowhere does the meanness of Pakistani men shine and glitter more than on social media. In one recent example, a woman who is on the internet famous for running an instagram account and blog centred on herself and her husband went on Twitter to share her husband's choice meanness. In this case, the man had played marital charades, cuddling and cooing over the wife while he romanced other women at the same time. Despite this quite visible and sinful foible, the sympathy that the men could muster up was only and exclusively for one of their tribe. After all, keeping men mean requires all men to stand up for the male right to being mean. So it was here: male Twitter warriors emerged from everywhere to defend the man and chide the woman for airing her personal life in public.

This is just one iteration of how the meanness standard is maintained at a constant high, but hundreds — even thousands — of examples can be found all day, every day. Many times, if a man wants to shed a bit of this attitude, recognise women as fellow humans sharing a country and planet, others of his gender will immediately jump in to ensure that he does not budge from a minimum standard of meanness. Toxic masculinity, after all, is ensured by the fact that men who do not bow to its dictates are not considered men at all. So too is it in Pakistan, where the only option to lay claim to masculinity is to immediately and visibly be mean, and for the zealots of chauvinism, truly cruel. Together this variety of men in Pakistan stomp the streets and push the plates and glower and glare as the women watch and wait and worry and wonder and hope that they will one day not have to deal with them.

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