

Pakistan: Cost of enforced modesty

Sunday 27 June 2021, by [HOODBHOY Pervez](#) (Date first published: 19 June 2021).

Implementation of the PTI's Single National Curriculum has started in Islamabad's schools and for students the human body is to become a dark mystery, darker than ever before. Religious scholars appointed as members of the SNC Committee are [supervising](#) the content of schoolbooks in all subjects including science. In the name of Islamic morality they have warned textbook publishers not to print any diagram or sketch in biology textbooks that show human figures "sans clothes".

For the teaching of biology this surpasses existing de facto prohibitions on teaching evolution, the foundational principle of biological sciences. Illustrations are crucial to explain the digestive system (with both entrance and exit points) and human reproduction, as well as the mammary gland. Diagrams, sketches and human skeletal forms cannot be draped. Excluding these from schoolbooks reduces the teaching of biology to a farce.

Inhibitions about the human body, of course, have been around for much longer than SNC. It's just that henceforth there will be still more. I have looked at a few biology textbooks published in past years by the Punjab and Sindh Textbook Boards and could not find meaningful accounts of mammalian organs and processes needed to sustain life on earth.

In one book from 1996 I did find a diagrammatised rabbit. But with essential parts fuzzed out, it is difficult to figure out whether it was male or female or the equipment that rabbits need to reproduce themselves. That someone should think an un-fuzzed diagram of this little animal would titillate students or stimulate promiscuous behaviour stumps me.

When enforced, clerical interpretations of modesty — translated as *sharm-o-haya* — cause people to suffer grievously. For example, ex-senator Maulana Gul Naseeb Khan, former provincial secretary of the MMA, roundly [condemned](#) diagnostic devices that can look inside women's bodies because, "We think that men could derive sexual pleasure from women's bodies while conducting ECG or ultrasound". Claiming that women would lure men under the pretext of medical procedures, the maulana's party banned ECG and ultrasound for women by male technicians and doctors when in power in KP. Trained females, however, were not to be found.

By inviting mullahs to regulate biology textbooks the PTI government has put Pakistan in reverse gear.

While *sharm-o-haya* applies to all, females bear the brunt. Culturally, 'breast' is a taboo word and so breast cancer cannot easily be called 'breast cancer'. This makes early detection hugely difficult and accounts for Pakistan's [rate](#) of breast cancer being the highest in South Asia. Most women feel embarrassed in coming forward; only when the pain becomes unbearable and when the cancer metastasizes does a woman finally confide in someone. By that time it is too late. Ovaries? Thousands of Pakistani women die yearly of ovarian and cervical cancer but 'ovaries' and 'cervix' are words too delicate to ever mention.

With such deep social inhibitions, should women become doctors? This appears an odd question.

Presently, about 70 per cent of medical students in Pakistan are female. Our brightest girls get sent to medical college by their parents but mostly to become trophy brides who never practise their profession. Nevertheless, this begs the question: can females become real doctors with their restricted medical knowledge? Would they ever be permitted to study the whole body, including the male anatomy? Or are women doctors only to treat sore throats or become midwives?

Over time the clerically supervised PTI school curriculum will magnify body-related taboos. Even today no one in government dares talk openly about population planning or contraceptives except with bated breath and only after looking over their shoulder. Although Pakistan produces as many people as the state of Israel every two years, yet it abolished the ministry for population planning long ago. It was replaced with some obscure, non-functioning organisation in each province.

Called the Population Welfare Department, the replacement was named to suit our 'cultural sensitivities'. The name implicitly suggests welfare for Pakistanis is possible irrespective of how many of us there are. PWD websites have fancy graphics but no content because ways to limit conception would violate *sharm-o-haya*. How the human species propagates appears to be a dark national secret that must be kept under wraps. Presumably, the morals of Pakistani society will be wrecked if we discover how babies are made. Somehow it's okay to breed like rabbits but not okay to know how rabbits breed.

Denying basic anatomical knowledge keeps minds clean, say our clerics. This could not be more false. Unsated curiosity and sexual repression drove internet pornographic traffic from Pakistan so high that PTA finally blocked porn sites. Until November 2011 internet cafes were principal porn dispensers and these promptly collapsed after the ban, ruining their owners. One hears, however, that paths to proscribed materials have simply shifted elsewhere. Who knows?

Sharm-o-haya makes protecting children from sexual predators much more difficult. Sometime ago, the PTI minister for human rights, Dr Shireen Mazari, [declared](#) at the launch of the Child Protection Campaign that 'Pakistan was ranked as the country with the largest numbers of child pornography viewers'. She suggested that campaigns should be launched at the school level to sensitise students to the menace.

Mazari is, of course, very correct. Her proposal would work far better at protecting children than having child killers and rapists swing from lamp posts, a popular demand. But such educational campaigns require making children aware of basic biological facts so that they can tell between proper and improper behaviour. How can that possibly square with Imran Khan's and Shafqat Mehmood's clerically supervised SNC?

The guardians of *sharm-o-haya* find undraped diagrams shameful. Yet, to protect their own kind, they suppress every scandal that might implicate them. Earlier this week, unchallengeable video [evidence](#) emerged of a mufti's sexual wrongdoing with a madressah lad. While he was stripped of his madressah teaching post after investigation, no cleric suggested Sharia punishment and all religious parties stayed mum.

Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries used to be the world's most stoutly conservative countries while Pakistan was counted among the more open, relaxed ones. This has changed. Presently, Pakistan is not just in reverse gear, it is hell-bent upon moving backward as fast as possible. The kind of mixed-up, confused and ignorant generations PTI's curriculum changes will produce in times ahead is absolutely terrifying.

Pervez Hoodbhoy is an Islamabad-based physicist and writer.

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to *ESSF newsletters in English and/or French*.

P.S.

Dawn

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1630231/cost-of-enforced-modesty>