

Pakistan: Ngoisation and desecularisation of feminism

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The women's rights movement in Pakistan was a largely secular and organic movement. Borne out of a response to the misogynist laws of the Zia era, this movement is entirely etched out of resistance to the faith-based politics of the time. Not only was it effective in protesting dictatorial rule during one of the most oppressive times the country had witnessed but it had strong linkages with grassroots-level groups engaging in radical, populist politics. However, over the years not only did this movement forgo its secular, but also its organic nature.

Lila Abu Lughoud, a renowned academic and commentator on gender politics would argue that the co option of such organic rights movements in developing countries into a larger transnational Human Rights movement is at the root of it. As countries became signatories to every international convention and body standing for gender justice they effectively commercialized their own struggles and allowed themselves to be guided by the dictates of donor agencies on how to fight for their own freedoms.

This 'commercialization of rights' that started in the 1990s saw a watering down of the organic women's rights movement into a more commercialized engagement with women's rights. Not only does the very language and program of the transnational women's movement blur the diversities in oppression between women from the North and South but such NGO programs tend to depoliticize the problem. Representing gender oppression ahistorically; delinking it from structural class differences and the active social engineering of the society along regressive religious lines that accommodate patriarchy and skews the understanding of gender equality.

As the movement became more commercial and donor driven it shifted from operating at the grassroots to the government. A statutory body such as National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) was established in 2000 with the specific purpose of examining legislations, policies, programs and other measures taken by the government for women's development. The contribution of NCSW remains ambiguous, but this government and donor alliance has led to a 'governmentalisation of women's' rights'. With such government institutions receiving massive funding on women's rights programs and becoming the institution through which women's rights receive both visibility and practical existence.

Some of the ubiquitous terms that are most misused within development are 'social mobilization' and 'organic'. As the women's movement in Pakistan became more subsumed by the transnational movement it faced the pressures to discard its 'secular and elitist' baggage in order to mobilize the masses and appear 'organic'. This implied accommodating the Islamist feminist tendencies of the Farhat Hashmi of Al Huda variety; who looked to reinterpret religious text in a more progressive

light in order to counter patriarchal state religion.

This accommodation of religious based advocacy is visible in donor funded programs. The Asia Foundation specifically has a program that seeks to advance Human Rights and Women's Rights within an Islamic framework across South Asia. Another such program that openly accommodates religion is the Women's Empowerment in Muslim Context (WEMC). One of the founders of the WEMC, Farida Shaheed of Shirkat Gah is an Islamic modernist, seeking modernist interpretations of religion towards ensuring women's rights as outlined in the Quran. Shaheed has argued that a secular stand by modernist Islamic feminists did not help to mobilize women across classes this was partly the motivation behind the accommodation of Islamist feminists.

What happened instead was that the overwhelming success of the spiritual sisterhood of the Islamist feminist meant a complete cooption of the women's movement, discrediting the more rights based secular approach. The Islamist feminist approach effectively replaced one set of hegemonic presumptions about women's position in Islam by another. The restriction imposed by working within the framework of religion when advocating for women's rights became visible when on the issue of rape, women from right-wing fundamentalist political parties participated in protests against the state, but would then distance themselves on Women Action Forum's (WAF) slogans against the Hudood Ordinances or Islamization. More recently this activism by Islamist feminists peaked in the Jamia Hafsa incident when female students of a religious school kidnapped a woman from the neighborhood whom they accused of prostitution and only let her free once she 'repented'. Modernist feminists such as members of WAF and other NGOs may have criticized these 'extremist forces' but this just goes to show that you cannot simultaneously accommodate faith-based and religio-cultural diversity, and yet when Islamic feminists challenge the state, condemn such actions.

The women's movement in Pakistan may have lost its secular and organic nature after it began to follow the dictates of donor driven programs, however as prominent feminist academics studying and working within WAF have observed that this was also due to ambivalence on the part of the very founders and leaders of the movement in reconciling their secular politics with their religio-cultural identities. This level of personal ambivalence made them attribute their inability to mobilize women across classes to their secular politics as opposed to wondering whether women have priorities and agendas other than gender which they did not recognize. Indeed a radical rethink of the women's movement in Pakistan is needed and it should start with questioning precisely how women themselves reconcile their personal identity and politics and redesign the movement so that it's not divided on religio-cultural lines. Unless the latter is done away with, the oppression within this very framework of religion and culture, and the power of those that create it cannot be questioned.

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