

In Pakistan and elsewhere: Mind your language, gentlemen

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This article (titled “Mind your language, gentlemen”) originally carried words that *The Nation’s* [Pakistan] editorial policy did not allow, which I completely understand. The words, therefore, had to be edited. The unedited, original article can be read [here](#).

We are not wearing bangles!” “Be a man and face it!” Familiar language? Awfully so. Around us, at home, at the workplace, on the roads, in political rallies, in advertisements, in newspapers, on the television, on social media. Where not?

Arsalan Iftikhar, the celebrated son of former Chief Justice of Pakistan, said it on TV and the anchorperson – a male – let it pass. A couple of months ago, it was Khwaja Saad Rafique, the Federal Minister, who was demanding of Pervez Musharraf to ‘be a man’ and face charges. Khwaja Asif, the Defence Minister, didn’t wait before raising similar ‘demands’ for the retired General. Federal Information Minister Pervez Rasheed was heard during those days mocking Musharraf’s ‘age-associated illness;’ the nuanced way of alluding to reduced sexual drive that equals a loss of ‘manhood’ in the world of egotistical misogynists.

Not very long ago, Tehmina Daultana, a member of parliament, was seen throwing bangles across the aisle in the National Assembly chamber as a gesture to describe them as cowards. Ahsan Iqbal, another Federal Minister was recently heard on TV saying, “*Hum ne chooriyaan nahin pehni hui*” (We are not wearing bangles), while responding to Imran Khan’s announcement of the long march. Even Tahir ul Qadri, the cleric prone to periodic fits of revolution, denied wearing bangles after police action on his Lahore residence last month.

What exactly is going on in the minds of these people?

Sexist language is not limited to one culture or one era. We certainly don’t have a copyright on it. During the Primaries in 2008, Barack Obama invited the wrath of feminists when he said “I understand that Senator Clinton, periodically when she is feeling down, launches attacks as a way of trying to boost her appeal.” Well, really? Periodically feeling down, Mr. Obama? When a man raises his tone in a heated debate, he is being ‘a bit aggressive.’ When a woman does it, it is just pre-menstrual syndrome. One strong argument from a woman, and all the misogynists show their true colours.

Words like ‘mankind’ and ‘brotherhood’ or, in Urdu, ‘*bhai chara*’ were not invented yesterday. Their unabashed usage today, however, is a blot on the 21st century man or woman who boasts of enlightenment and modernization. In societies that boast ‘respect for women,’ it is ironic that most men (and women) will still use sexual organs to animate cases of bravery, courage and valour. Most of the words and phrases used to this effect, describe (or imply) that to be a woman is to be

subservient or secondary or inferior.

Traditionally, the titles for the positions of power have 'man' as their suffix. 'Chairman' was changed to 'Chairperson' only when Ms. Nusrat Bhutto and Ms. Benazir Bhutto became the Chairperson and Co-Chairperson of their party. That trend ended with them. The next party heads reinstated the title to 'Chairman' as soon as they came in. Perhaps it is too difficult to call a woman a chairwoman. Perhaps it hurts far too badly.

According to a 2009 paper by Marge Piercy, there are around 220 words to describe sexually 'promiscuous' women, while only 20 to describe the same behavior in men. Using sexually demeaning language for women is an activity far more pronounced in South Asian cultures. A woman is branded all kinds of derogatory terms if she is a non-conformist. At least, this is the impression I get while facing criticism in the media. Out of more than a dozen women that I have spoken to, who were fiercely abused on social media, almost 99% admitted to having been branded "prostitutes" alongside other sexually derogatory terms because they said politically controversial things.

My cigarettes have earned me many such titles lately. A year ago, an otherwise progressive and self-proclaimed 'secular' blog used an enlarged picture of myself holding a cigarette in one of their posts, where I was being castigated and disparaged for something I was presumed to have said. The subliminal message was: Look, she smokes; she is certainly a bad woman.

In 1911, Ambrose Bierce wrote *The Devil's Dictionary* and expressed her surprise that titles like Miss and Missus alluding to a woman's marital status did not exist for men. This is probably because it has to be made "public" when a woman still has market appeal in society's favourite game: the marriage hunt. Marriageability was and still is such a sought-after trait that it determines a woman's worth. Many factors, in turn, would determine one's 'marriageability' including being a Miss, being a virgin, being chaste, being a career-less, ambition-less woman, so on and so forth.

On social media I experienced a new low in this trend, that some might find particularly unpalatable. This is however, the truth; these are words women hear in daily life and these incidents should rightfully make us uncomfortable. A couple of years ago, somebody threatened me with rape and I made that threat public. At the time, I was told by perfectly educated and modern young people that I was so 'repulsive and ugly' that no one would 'even rape you.' Apart from redefining or re-orienting sexist language, gentlemen and ladies have to embed in their minds, that it is what you have in your skull that determines your worth; nothing else.

P.S.

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