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Pakistan religious leaders slam women's protection act - Letter to Prime Minister and Punjab Chief Minister

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Pakistan: Women's Action Forum (WAF) Letter to Prime Minister and Punjab Chief Minister on Women Protection Act Punjab

Honorable Prime Minister and Honorable Chief Minister Punjab

Women's Action Forum (WAF) welcomes the Punjab Women Protection Act passed by the Government of Punjab as an important step towards addressing domestic violence.

WAF notes the rising opposition to the law with trepidation. We appreciate the government for standing up against this form of bullying and fervently hope and demand that you continue to do so.

WAF observes that this opposition is not a spontaneous frenzy but a deliberate whipping up of religious sentiments based on fallacies and distortions about the law. The regressive elements of society have created this showdown as a conduit for a larger battle that the state and government of Pakistan has decided to fight against extremist thought and action.

Similar laws have been passed in Balochistan and Sindh provinces without provoking any such hysteria. Given the Punjab government's crackdown on hate speech, regulation of madrassahs and other efforts to promote progressive and democratic values, the extremists have chosen to fight back through discrediting women's rights because for them, women remain a 'soft target'.

The arguments used by them are wrong.

They say the law will break homes. Any home that is held together by women silently suffering violence and abuse is already broken. The government's own statistics, collected through the Pakistan and Demographic Health Survey (2012/13) records 37% of Pakistani women suffer abuse at the hands of their spouses. Substantiating evidence is also available from the government run crisis centers and Darul Amans.

They have called the law un-Islamic. WAF recognizes that no religion in the world endorses exploitation and violence against family members. They have called the law a Western agenda. WAF observes that protection of, care and consideration for family members are among the most fundamental Pakistani family values.

WAF is used to such allegations because unfortunately these are raised every time a basic point is made, that women are human beings. If the extremists are to be believed, the country's morality, social structures, faith and harmony are all premised on men having the entitlement to beat women in their homes with impunity.

These very same lobbies have never spoken out or acted up in defense of women; including the

poorest of women, rural women, non-literate women and those from minorities. Domestic violence is a crime committed in homes across all class, faith and ethnic lines. WAF recalls the first national conversation on domestic violence in the case of Zainab Noor where the imam of a mosque tortured his wife, inserted live electrical rods into her body and destroyed her inner organs. There was complete silence from these religio-political organizations. This was in 1994, in Kahuta, Punjab. Twenty years later, another imam of a mosque raped and killed a 12 year old girl inside a madrassah, this time in Badin in Sindh. The same silence continued.

In between there have been countless cases of men brutalizing women in their families, cutting off the noses and ears of their wives, killing their sisters for honor or selling their daughters to pay debts. These regressive elements have not condemned any of these acts.

On the other hand, they have pursued an anti-women, anti-democratic politics, given that women make up half of Pakistan's population. Some have used women's quota in Parliament to send their nominees to go and speak against women's presence in Parliament. Others have declared that parliamentary politics and democracy itself is against Islam. Some of them have told women survivors of violence not to appeal to the State and to wait for the Day of Judgment to get justice. Others have said the State itself is an instrument of the devil.

WAF reiterates that those protesting against the law are inherently anti-democratic. The misuse of religion to justify their regressive, discriminatory agendas including the 'anti-Islam' label to blackmail governments into compliance must be stopped and firmly resisted.

WAF recalls that the Constitution declares equality and urges the protection of all citizens and revocation of the impunity for violence against women. The freedom and security of citizens cannot be open to compromise.

WAF appreciates that the government is standing by women as voters, as citizens and above all as equal human beings.

WAF is not an NGO or a funded body, it is a voluntary association of women from across all provinces with Chapters in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Hyderabad, and Peshawar, which has been addressing women's rights violations for thirty five years.

Women's Action Forum (WAF)

P.S.

* <http://bolobhi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/WAF-Letter-to-PM-and-CM-Punjab-on-WP-Act.pdf>