

Pakistan: Other Women's Days

Sunday 12 June 2022, by [ZAKARIA Rafia](#) (Date first published: 2 March 2022).

It was January 1979. The Shah of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi, had just left his country but Imam Khomeini had not yet arrived in Iran. It was a moment of tumult and confusion, and no one was certain who would take over. It was around this time that a group called CAIFI (Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran) decided to organise an event for International Women's Day on March 8, 1979.

CAIFI was a leftist group, and it was made up of progressive men and women. These included people who had been targeted and even tortured by the Shah's notorious Savak police. Now, suddenly, they were free from the Shah's repression, but it was unknown whether they would have a stake in the new order. They were undecided even about holding International Women's Day. During the time of the Shah, the day had the opposite connotation of freedom. Many were apparently 'forced' to celebrate it, and in some areas of the country, women had to show Iran's march towards progress by removing their veil. CAIFI did not support this sort of coerced unveiling, and that was their major reason for questioning whether the day should be commemorated at all.

In the end, they decided that they would have an event, make an effort to redefine the day as a true marker of freedom, one where all sorts of women, veiled and unveiled, from the Iranian left and right could come together. To make the day truly 'international', the women also invited some feminists from around the world, notably France and the United States. Again and again, CAIFI reiterated that all women were welcome to the event; they even made a special effort to attract women who were fully veiled.

The women who arrived from the West were surprised by this attempted unification between the women of the right and the women of the left, both of whom had faced persecution under the Shah. As one of them, Kate Millett, wrote in her book *Going to Iran*, the women veiled in full black looked "forbidding". Feminist Simone de Beauvoir never actually came to Iran, but when talking about the invitation she had received she imagined the whole purpose of the visit was to save Iranian women from the veil. As is still the case, almost half a century later, the entire identity of the women of Iran was being reduced to whether or not they were wearing the veil.

If Iranian women had been permitted to sort out their future themselves, they would have done just that.

The Iranian women who belonged to CAIFI were secular. They supported the right of other Iranian women to wear the veil. This followed a definition of secularism that did not prohibit religious expression in the public sphere. Instead, it would have advocated that the state stay out of women's affairs altogether and allow women who wanted to wear the veil and women who did not want to wear it to make their own choices about their attire. The state, they correctly advocated, had no right to prescribe the veil or prohibit it. All women could make their own choices.

It is also possible that the secular women on the left saw that there was no going forward with a unified women's movement in the country unless they were able to draw together all kinds of women

whose beliefs ran the entire political and religious gamut. The Shah had forcibly imposed secularism, tried to prohibit the veil and persecute religious leaders. Those persecuted during his dictatorship had to be brought back into the fold. Bans on the veil were top-down efforts that did not equal freedom for women.

The Iranian conundrum has some parallels to what Pakistani women are facing today. In its efforts to draw attention from systemic and economic woes, various government officials have taken to [picking on](#) the Aurat March as some expression of great moral collapse. The organisers of the march have repeatedly pointed out that their gathering is open to all women and to all other groups who have experienced persecution. They have prepared charters and manifestos that are available to anyone who wants to actually read them. Despite this, many on television channels continue to push negative propaganda about the march. For their part, those in government who cannot leave women alone to make their own choices have also come up with their own take on Women's Day and asked for the observance of Hijab Day instead in response to the event.

The marriage of religious and secular is never an easy one, but Pakistani women should make an attempt towards it. Sadly, the outcome of the Iranian effort was less than encouraging. The March 8 event was held, and all sorts of women spoke, including fully veiled women and even the Western guests. Imam Khomeini had arrived the month before. On the eve of International Women's Day, the new regime announced that veiling would be mandatory in the workplace. Thousands of women participated in the March 8 protest. Demonstrations went on for days.

It is my belief that if Iranian women had been permitted to sort out their future for themselves, they would have done just that and arrived at a compromise to permit both groups to retain their freedoms over their bodies and their lives. The men did not let women do this. It is the same in Pakistan; the loudest voices against the Aurat March are male voices with a handful of women who can gain the goodwill of patriarchs by criticising their own. If the women were left alone for once, if they were permitted to figure out their own way, they would be successful in determining a path forward. But the men of Pakistan, like the men of Iran, are too afraid and so they criticise and condemn and try to drown out the voices of women who have had enough of their dominance.

Rafia Zakaria is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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

P.S.

Dawn

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1677816/other-womens-days>