

Pakistan: The other half

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TODAY is International Women's Day. On this single day out of 365 days, women review the progress that they have been able to make over the past year. In most countries, it is understood that the single day allotted to women is not a measure of their importance in society but rather a day of commemoration on which they can regularly assess the distance they have come (and have yet to cover) in their efforts towards empowerment and gender equality.

It is the opposite in Pakistan, where even a paltry one day out of 365 days may be too high a number when it comes to the importance given to women in this country. Many Pakistani men would argue — in all seriousness — that 'one-out-of-365' ignores the culture of their country, whose central tenet somehow always seems to boil down to the suppression of women. While other countries may come up with policy measures that would help their institutions and private enterprises achieve gender parity, Pakistan, or rather the majority of Pakistani men, are convinced that women do not deserve equality or empowerment. Instead, the expectation is that women must spend all their lives apologising for their existence and trying their best to minimise their presence.

Because of this, it would not be at all surprising if girls in Pakistan are born saying 'sorry' and die saying 'thank you', regardless of how difficult their life may have been. As daughters, they must make up for their existence by functioning as talented cooks or cleaners for the household, their good performance allowing them to bargain for one more year of education. As wives, they must produce children and raise them so that their maintenance is a paltry surcharge over what would already have been spent on raising their progeny. As older women, they must manipulate the men of the household in a manner that ensures that they will be taken for doctors' appointments and have a bit of money for themselves. And as if this grim circle of life were not enough, at every step of the way, women are provided with reminders concerning their inferior or unwanted status and their inability to make decisions for themselves.

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So complete is the devaluation of women in society that our little girls are raised on a steady diet of misogyny that ensures that this state of affairs will never change. From a young age, they learn that their futures depend on how easily they are able to manipulate their brothers and fathers. Other women, powerless like themselves, are not worth the effort of forming an alliance with.

To understand the state of most women in the country, it is necessary to imagine a large penal colony in some far-flung place. When supplies arrive, the guards look through and take the best items for themselves, even if they already have enough to eat and drink. Whatever scraps are left are thrown to the prisoners, who squabble amongst themselves to get enough to permit them to survive. Others rely on the guards who pick and choose favourites whom they reward based on their moods and whims.

After a few decades of this routine, no one talks of uniting against the guards. Just like birds who have forgotten to fly because of their long captivity in cages, they will make no attempts at freedom.

One thing that Pakistani women know only too well is that the absolutely disastrous position in which the country finds itself today is entirely the fault of Pakistani men. This International Women's Day, Pakistan is teetering on the edge of default; a prospect that is utterly devastating. Inflation has reached incomprehensible numbers. Some days ago, it was reported that inflation had reached the highest levels on record and that it was likely to increase still further. This means that there will be millions of families now who will also have to compromise on bare necessities, let alone reduce 'luxuries' like education. The rupee continues to depreciate further, making it impossible for the country to buy fuel and other necessities from the international market.

But while Pakistani women did not make this mess, they will certainly have to bear the brunt of the consequences. A large number of men laid off from jobs only contribute to domestic violence, and thousands of them are being asked to leave because many of the industries dependent on foreign supplies, from textiles to auto manufacturing, have already shut their doors.

With Ramazan on its way, the rocketing price of foodstuff will make it difficult not only to manage ill-tempered men, but also to feed families used to eating special foods during the month of fasting. If the country does default on its debts, the situation will be even worse; there will be lines for food and more black markets; medicine will be unavailable. Life, in short, will be barely livable. It is a frightening prospect, whose worst effects will be avoided by the wealthy — who can leave for Dubai — but which will crush everyone else.

It follows, then, that International Women's Day, 2023, is a day of crisis in a year of crisis in an existence of crisis. As times turn grimmer, instead of looking forward with renewed energy to conquering new frontiers, Pakistani women can at best wonder about what more they will have to sacrifice, knowing that the men in charge of the family and of the country will practically do away with their food, their health and their welfare before they bother to inconvenience themselves. This, perhaps, is the fate of countries where the skills, talents, intelligence and acumen of half the population is wasted because the fragile egos of the other half cannot bear the competition.

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P.S.

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