

Feminist Movements In Pakistan: Challenges and Struggles

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Asma Aamir writes about the Pakistani feminist movements history and current practices, their challenges and ways forward

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I would like to talk about Pakistan, a country that has not a secular State, like Turkey and others. It is officially the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, run by the federal and provincial governments, following the Constitution of 1973. The Judiciary system is divided into civil courts, criminal courts and the Sharia court, which examine the laws of the country in compliance with the Islamic law and rights.

The Federal Shariat Court is the only authority which holds the constitutional power to prohibit and prevent the enactment of laws which are deemed to be un-Islamic by the parliament of Pakistan. It is predominantly focused on examining new or existing law of Pakistan. If a law violates the Quran, sunnah or hadith, the Shariat Court will prohibit its enactment.

The Constitution of 1973 guarantees, in its article 16, the freedom of assembly; in article 17, the freedom of association; and in article 19, the freedom of speech and expression. All of this should empower every citizen to exercise their fundamental rights, without any discrimination. The absence of these rights is the biggest block for any society to grow. The increasing human rights violations are an open threat to democracy and the work of human rights defenders. The Constitution guarantees these rights, but they are not being exercised in practical life. It is specially violated when it comes to women's rights. There is limited room for freedom of expression, speech, and assembly, specifically, for the women and young girls. Their rights need strict implementation in the country.



During and after the pandemic, the inflation had increased poverty and the multiple socio economic and political challenges with the diverse social fabric of Pakistan. The fast growing population and adverse impacts on the ethnic and religious minorities result in the increase of the divisions between urban and rural spaces and between big and small cities. All that are contributing factors to the continuous change in the social behaviour of the masses. The pandemic context reduced workforce across all economic sectors and caused the loss of many jobs. The working women, especially the labour class women working in the factories and the domestic workers, suffered more. Teachers

were fired from their jobs immediately. And violence against women and girls increased during the pandemic.

Ethnic and religious intolerance is a routine matter and cases are reported now and then.

Asma Aamir

Feminism In The Pakistan History

With all these challenges, the insecurity among minorities in Pakistan had increased with the passage of time. In the decade of 1980, during the dictatorial and anti women regime of Zia Uul Haq, the Civic spaces for women were narrowed down. In that period, the State made effective use of the religious political forces to achieve its power. It silenced political parties, clamped the press and academy with censorship and banned students and trade unions movements.

It was this political moment, in the 1980s, when the first feminist movement, the Women's Action Forum, got momentum. The women gathered and repealed the Hudood Ordinances, laws enacted in 1979, which discriminated the non muslim women regarding witness evidence in case of rape or gang rape. That movement organised the rally to protest against the Law of Evidence (which obligates a raped woman to show four witnesses to prove the crime), the Hudood Ordinances and other laws that discriminate against women. The demonstration happened in The Mall road, in the city of Lahore, where I belong. Despite being a peaceful demonstration, the use of tear gas to disperse crowds and make arrests was not uncommon. The Women's Action Forum was —and still is— a voice against all sorts of injustices, especially against women and minorities. Later, in 2006, the laws were upgraded, and now there is no requirement of four witnesses.

The second popular feminist movement in Pakistan started in 2000, with the name of Alliance Against Sexual Harassment (AASHA), and the motto of stopping sexual harrasment at workplace. The activist and gender expert Fouzia Saeed, along with other sisters, as the World March of Women member Bushra Khaliq, engaged key stakeholders like grassroots women, media, parliamentarians, political parties. With these efforts, in 2010 they luckily succeeded to pass the law of protection against harassment of women at the workplace.

Then, the current grassroots movement titled Aurat March [Women's March, in English] got momentum five years back, in 2018, with the motto of ending patriarchy. The Aurat March is the movement of young feminist girls, with a more inclusive and intergenerational approach. They conduct the Aurat March annually on 8th March, and during the whole year they also do activities such as press releases, small demonstrations and artistic work.

Contemporary challenges

Young feminists face death, rape and acid throwing threats, while they exercise their constitutional

right to assembly and right to freedom of speech. Raising a slogan has troubled and distressed the patriarchal mindset in Pakistan.

The social fabric, structure, and practices are against women. The writ of the government is weak to protect women. Women are facing opposition in their homes, streets, and workplaces, but we follow our march on the streets, in connection with the International Women's Struggle Day and other agendas.

Online bashing in comments and inbox messages made many young girls insecure. By consequence, they had to stop posting their participation in public spaces or started ignoring those comments, dealing by themselves with their fear and insecurity. Media and YouTubers' detrimental tactics spoiled the cause of girls and women without investigating the source. Electronic and print media published doctored posters with images of the girls and women, who joined rallies and marches including me.

Social media affects the sociology and psychology of which is communicated, with the help of technology. The growing populism has translated and stamped that the society is still not ready to give and provide bodily rights to girls and women. The slogan "mera jism meri marzi" ("my body, my choice") became a daring and bold expression used by the young feminist to deny the control over women bodies in shape of marital rape and child without choice. Many people disowned this slogan and few owned it.

The space for dissent is rapidly squeezing in the Asia-Pacific region. Similarly, civic spaces and young feminist movements in Pakistan are also at stake.

Life threats to marchers have increased. Women have to deal with cyber harassment, sexual harassment at public places and stigmatisation, because of fundamentalisms, right-wing sectors and the absence of secularism. All of that are the emerging challenges which are a big ask from State and communities to find their solutions, to consider women as equal citizens of this country, conceive pro-women policies, and ensure civic spaces for women and girls.

Our way forward is mobilising and strengthening the capacities of hundreds of young girls in movement building, under the banner of World March of Women Pakistan. Doing this daily activism, we will continue the struggle for women's rights and structural changes. That is why we say that "we resist to live, we march to transform".

Asma Aamir

P.S.

• Capire. 09/02/2024:

<https://capiremov.org/en/analysis/feminist-movements-in-pakistan-challenges-and-struggles/>

• Asma Aamir is member of World March of Women Pakistan and the substitute member of the International Committee of the movement, representing the Asian region. This article is an edited version of her speech in the 13th International Meeting of the World March of Women, which happened in October 2023, in Ankara, Turkey.