

No Longer Worried about Becoming a 'Free Sex Zone'

HARIS GAZDAR

High politics in Pakistan will continue to provide its share of thrills and frills, but this is an appropriate moment to take stock of the politics of the most fundamental relationship that helps to shape all others – that between women and men. Social policy retain huge potential for challenging patriarchy in many subtle but fundamental ways, and the present array of political forces offers as good an opportunity as any for pushing ahead with such an agenda.

At its base Pakistani society is deeply patriarchal and patriarchy sets the parameters for virtually all other institutions including markets, social networks, systems of dispute resolution, party politics and even the state. Statistical measures such as the sex ratio and gender differences in literacy, health, labour force participation, and voter turnout tell a striking but incomplete story. The issue is not just female disadvantage, though the disadvantage is severe and pervasive. There are just 93 females for every 100 males in the population, indicating some eight million “missing women” in Pakistan.¹ The literacy rate for men is almost twice as high as for women, and only 20 per cent of adult women are counted as part of the workforce compared with over 90 per cent of men.² The quantitative indicators are merely reflections of the ways in which the patriarchal family extends its reach across society, and reproduces itself over time.

Extreme forms of violence against women – physical assault, rape, “honour” crime, and murder – make headlines. Some individual cases become conspicuous and are taken up by the mass media. But the everyday oppression and exclusion of women is hardly even noticed. Political analysts can spin entire theses about democracy and dictatorship without ever wondering out aloud why the voter turnout for women is a third less than that for men, and that most women voters “follow their men” in any case. Economic pundits regularly inform us about the foreign exchange earned by Pakistani workers abroad without making even a passing reference to the fact that state policy virtually prohibits the emigration of women workers.

Gender Apartheid

Ask a young woman in Karachi about why she puts on a “burqa” while travelling to work on public transport and she may tell

you about all of the verbal and physical aggression she experiences as a matter of routine. She would rather not have to deal with the male gaze too, while trying to remain cheerful through the working day. Small wonder, then, that millions of women are involved in home-based work with wages that are a fraction of the going labour market wage. Some “market” indeed – half of whose potential participants face a playing field that is about as level as a ski slope.

In smaller towns and villages travelling alone on public transport would be out of the question. Over 80 per cent of women in a survey covering rural Punjab and Sindh reported that they could not visit a health facility on their own if it were located over an hour’s journey away from home. When these women were asked if they felt safe walking alone during the day, 18 per cent said that they felt unsafe even within their settlements, while 60 per cent felt unsafe walking outside the settlement.³ It might be noted that Punjab and Sindh are considered to be “more relaxed” in terms of women’s mobility compared with the other two provinces – North West Frontier Province and Balochistan.

Public space is clearly a male domain across Pakistan, and this goes a long way in explaining gender differences in health, education, labour force participation and political activity. Pakistan is not that different, of course, from many “traditional” societies in terms of its gendered division of space. The strength of the patriarchal family is projected through broader caste and kinship group networks or tribal organisation, extending norms that regulate interaction between women and men. These norms can persist and get reproduced even in the face of gender-neutral formal rights of citizenship, urbanisation and economic change. In fact, political and economic change can open up strange paradoxes.

Upward mobility of formerly oppressed castes is often symbolised through the acquisition of stricter gender segregation. The narrative of change often has statements about “low castes” becoming more patriarchal in a society whose apex of power is the patriarch: “we are

Haris Gazdar (gasht@yahoo.com) is with the Karachi-based Collective for Social Science Research.

empowered now because ‘our women’ will no longer go and work in ‘their houses’.”⁴ In many cases this means that women from upwardly mobile families stop going out to work, and in some instances not step out of home at all. These observations about upwardly mobile groups acquiring the cultural norms of the dominant groups are not too dissimilar from the process of sanskritisation that was described and analysed in the Indian context by M N Srinivas.

The Honour Code

There are even formal statements that link political empowerment with acquiring patriarchal control over women – or acquiring “honour” in a society where a patriarchal “honour code” remains powerful. It was seen as an act of great political symbolism in the Baloch tribal tradition when upon assuming the chieftaincy of the Bugti tribe in 1944, Akbar Khan Bugti nominally freed the marhatta (a subject caste of the Bugtis) from bondage, and included them among those who were protected by the patriarchal honour code of “siyahkari”. Until that time marhatta men were formally barred from invoking the tribal honour code in case of sexual transgression against “their” women. Pioneering research on honour-related violence in upper Sindh by recently-elected parliamentarian Nafisa Shah shows repeated cases of men from the formerly marginalised groups gaining symbolic parity with their more powerful neighbours by inflicting violence upon “their own” women.

The role of Islam in all this has been widely misunderstood. It is all too easy but lazy to point to Islam’s prescriptive tone with respect to women’s mobility and autonomy to explain the persistence and reproduction of patriarchal norms in Pakistan. The responsibility for this association of Islam with social conservatism lies largely with Islamic “modernists” such as the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami, the late Maulana Maudoodi. Maudoodi and other contemporary interpreters of Islam were not interested in the sociology of existing “traditional” communities in Pakistan. Their main focus was on the construction and maintenance of patriarchal control in the “modern” setting of urban life, educational and employment opportunities, and

gender-neutral formal rights of citizenship. Maudoodi and his ilk are not the sources of patriarchy in Pakistan – rather, they provided intellectual and ideological props for the perpetuation of traditional patriarchal norms in a changing world

The ideologues offered sustenance to Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime in the 1980s and lent him the desperately needed Islamic credentials. State policies actively discouraged women’s entry into the workforce, and encouraged the “moral policing” of public spaces. The Hudood laws promulgated under Zia-ul-Haq’s martial law government in 1979 placed the full ideological and coercive apparatus of the state at the disposal of the patriarchs. Not only was adultery made a criminal offence, but the law gave draconian powers to the police to pursue and detain individuals on the mere filing of a complaint.

Social Policy Issues

Amendments brought about through the Women’s Protection Act of 2006 took away the bite of Zia’s Hudood laws through drastically altering the procedure of filing and pursuing a complaint. Pervez Musharraf proclaimed the Women’s Protection Act as a sign of his regime’s enlightenment and its commitment to reform. In fact there was a split in his own party over the issue, and the smooth passage of the Act was made possible by the support received from the then opposition, the Pakistan People’s Party. The debate leading up to the change of law was revealing and historic. Religious parties and their allies in the Musharraf camp justified their stand as a defence of Islam and morality against vulgarity. It was said that the law will turn Pakistan into a “free sex zone”. Despite this emotive, if absurd, rhetoric, the public mood had swung decisively against the religious lobby. So much so, that the issue has disappeared from public view without a trace.

The Jamaat-e-Islami and its fellow travellers were right in fearing changes in the Zia-era religious laws. They know that the state wields enormous, if subtle power, through its ability to create economic incentives and symbolic gesture, to effect changes in the gendered division of space. If the machinery of the state is not going to be available for enforcing the writ of

the patriarch, it may become available for enforcing formal rights of citizenship.

The “normal” course of social policy too will continue to create new opportunities for challenging tradition. There is a proposal on the table for doubling the number of women employed by the Lady Health Workers Programme – a health and family planning service delivery scheme that already employs some 1,00,000 women in rural areas. Many of these women are the first ones in their communities to have taken up paid formal sector jobs, and a soon-to-be-published study by Ayesha Khan shows that the experience has changed them and their surroundings in interesting ways. The steady increase in the provision of government schooling facilities for girls in rural areas has had an unintended consequence. There has been a mushrooming of low-fee private schools across the country that have taken advantage of the availability of young educated women – some 2,00,000 of them on last count – who are keen to take up paid employment.⁵

In the political dramas that lie ahead social policy issues are unlikely to make an appearance. Thankfully, the debate about whether Pakistan would be a “free sex zone” is not high on the list of issues that preoccupy the big guns in the political parties, the parliament, the presidency, the judiciary and the military. Unlike many other countries, in Pakistan the depoliticisation of women’s issues at the top is a minor blessing. It means the resumption of normal business – of hiring more Lady Health Workers, making contraceptives more easily available, creating more job opportunities for female teachers, registering women voters and letting young people choose their life partners without incurring the wrath of the state.

NOTES

- 1 The World Bank, *Bridging the Gender Gap: Opportunities and Challenges*, Pakistan Country Gender Assessment, Islamabad, 2005.
- 2 Government of Pakistan, *Labour Force Survey*, Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2005-06, http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/fbs/publications/lfs2005_06/summary.pdf
- 3 The World Bank, op cit.
- 4 Such generic statements were recorded by the author during fieldwork in various parts of rural Punjab over the last few years.
- 5 See ‘Students Today, Teachers Tomorrow? Identifying Constraints on Private Schools’, *Leaps Project Report*, September 2007, [http://leapsproject.org/assets/publications/FromStudent_ToTeacher%20\(12\).pdf](http://leapsproject.org/assets/publications/FromStudent_ToTeacher%20(12).pdf).