

Women in Pakistan: Change is imminent

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Last year, a women's rights activist in the southern province of Pakistan was murdered by her husband because he disapproved of her activism and her participation in the international women's day rally, Aurat March. Aurat means 'woman' in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan.

This year, organizers of the Aurat March received death threats for allowing women to participate, holding placards with bold statements in retaliation against body shaming, patriarchy and abuse against women of all kinds – to name a few. The women who participated in turn were the focus of severe backlash particularly on social media and were ridiculed and trolled for their brazen attitudes. Among all conclusions drawn and judgements made, one stands out: the fight between patriarchy and women's rights in Pakistan still has a long way to go.

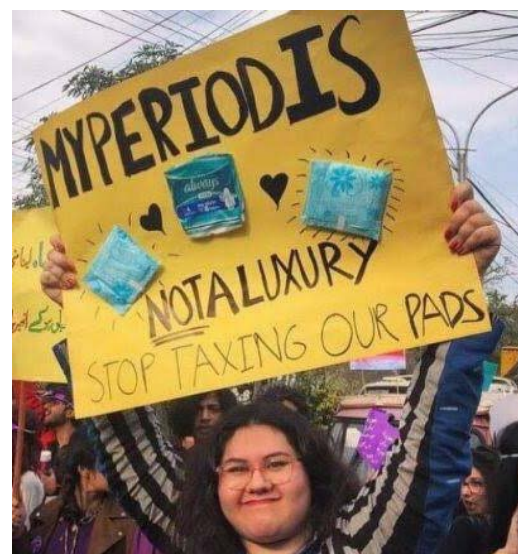
With an increase in awareness and to some extent, literacy, with roughly 50 percent of the female population in the country educated, activism among women is on the rise. This is a much desired situation. The country's lawmakers are still engaged in a debate to raise the minimum marriageable age for girls to 18. Education for girls in many areas of the country is still considered unnecessary or even immoral. 'Honour killings' are to date prevalent in many tribal and even urban areas, where a woman may be murdered, raped or paraded naked to avenge her family's honour tarnished by another, with the woman herself often having no role in the dishonourable act. Domestic abuse of women continues to be reported, if not daily, weekly. The abuse takes an ugly form when the husband shaves off his wife's head, tortures her physically, chops off a body part (an ear or nose) or even burns her to death.

For women who work, harassment is a serious issue. Women using public transport, public sites and places of employment are all vulnerable to lewd messages and indecent gestures. Although harassment at the workplace is now a criminal offence and efforts are underway to ease reporting and subsequent action, the entrenched patriarchal mindset is a significant impediment in resolving many issues.

Much of Pakistani society still follows century-old traditions and practices. Literacy among

women is a recent phenomenon. But mostly, women have been believed to be passive homemakers and child bearers, while men are caretakers and providers. Most families are headed by men, which means that decisions about each member of the family—marriage, education and even careers—are approved by men. The males in a family are not expected to manage their personal possessions or take care of their belongings; this is also part of a woman's job. Even today, women who stay out late, smoke publicly (public consumption of alcohol is banned for all citizens in compliance with Islamic law), enjoy male company or dress in a flattering manner, are seen as immoral. Hence, for many men, working women who may embrace most or all of the above qualities, are believed to have a 'loose' character and they feel no hesitation or guilt in treating them callously.

Be it tradition or religion, a tool of some kind is still used to suppress women. But it is the resilience of these very women, together with many others like them around the world, which promises a change. Since the constitution of the country provides equal rights to men and women, Pakistan was the first Muslim nation to be headed by a woman. Today, women, although fewer in number, can be seen in almost all professional fields and walks of life. More and more women in Pakistan are relying on self-driven automobiles, which includes motorbikes, to commute to colleges, universities and workplaces. Violence against women is still prevalent, but the difference is, they are now fighting back. Whether by speaking out or even learning how to use force, they refuse to be held down. The bold expressions used in the Aurat March and the women's defense of them despite the odds are valid examples. Change is imminent.



Placards displayed in Aurat March in Pakistan 2019