

## **In Pakistan, Women Turn the Wheels of Change**

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It is slowly, although still not frequently, becoming the norm to see a female motorbike rider on the streets of Lahore, the second largest metropolis in Pakistan. For anyone from a developed country, or even those in the neighbourhood, this may not be something unusual. But in a country bound by tradition, it is close to a major achievement.

For women in Pakistan, the odds are high. Abuse and violence against women are still major issues, as evidenced by all the discussions and events that are part of the worldwide 16 Days Activism Against Gender-based Violence held between November and December every year. Harassment on the street, in the workplace and in the digital sphere is still rampant. Many decisions regarding a woman's education, marriage and career are still traditionally made by other family members. And where the streets are already cluttered with commuters belonging to a burgeoning population, the scant resources for transport coupled with lack of safety becomes a major hurdle for women traveling alone on public transport.

On the streets of Karachi, Lahore, Quetta and Peshawar, some of the major urban centres in Pakistan, the modes for public transport provided by the government are shockingly low in number. Although Lahore over the years has grown into an intricate network of highways, flyovers and underpasses, public transport in the city includes only a few bus services and a very limited inter-city railway network. This huge gap is thus filled by the private sector in the form of rickshaws, cabs and the now popular, ride hailing services, with a sizeable percentage of the population owning personal private vehicles as well.

For working women or female students, traveling alone can be a nightmarish experience. Trying to make their way onto a crowded bus poses a significant chance of a male stranger deliberately bumping into or brushing up suggestively. Cat-calling is also not unusual. A walk along a secluded street is a high risk for women as they may be followed by mischievous strangers or worse, be sexually harassed. If nothing else, cab drivers have been known to try taking advantage of young female travellers by extracting a higher-than-normal fare.

In these circumstances, women in Pakistan are often dependent on family members, if they are unable to own or drive their own cars. A motorbike, however, is a relatively better option, owing to its low cost and less space. But this is where tradition again makes its presence known.

Pakistan is officially an Islamic republic where Muslims make up more than 95 percent of the population. Women in Pakistan have been driving cars since the country's declaration of independence nearly 80 years ago, unlike some other Muslim majority countries like Afghanistan and until recently, Saudi Arabia. But cars provide a safe 'cover' for women, where they are enclosed in a space, away from prying eyes or hands. A motorbike, on the other hand, has mostly been deemed inappropriate, shameful or even unsafe for women in terms of handling the vehicle. Where female students could easily learn to ride a motorbike and conveniently use it to commute to their colleges or

universities, many still feel that they would be exposed on the streets, vulnerable to harassment or even accidents.

Dealing with such misconceptions and fears has been the aim of the Sufi Foundation, a private organisation which has started a ‘Women on Wheels’ movement. As 2019 drew to a close, the foundation launched a movement in the country’s largest urban centre, Karachi, to provide better mobility to women through subsidised motorbikes, road safety education and training, and networking opportunities for women drivers.



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The project has already trained 3,500 women in the province of Punjab to ride motorbikes and provided them at a discounted rate of 40 percent. It aims to train 10,000 more women. Needless to say, the project has received an overwhelming response from women.

Women in Pakistan account for 49 percent of its population, and yet most of them are dependent on men for their day-to-day activities. The ability and convenience and above all, freedom to travel alone, are not just better solutions for transport. It also opens doors to many other avenues previously closed. For where a lack of safe travel or transport had been the only hurdle, or rather an excuse to keep an exuberant female away from pursuing higher education or excelling in her career, its removal is starting to transform the few opportunities available for young women in Pakistan into an infinite number in the years to come. The wheels have turned.



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