



In The Forefront Of The Struggle

- The Pakistani Women's Movement Today

WOMEN in Pakistan, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, have been the victims of double oppression, that of class and of gender. This means that in a country like Pakistan they have had to struggle hard to win any concessions from a male dominated society, and have also had a hard time maintaining themselves and their families because the vast majority of the populace are victims of deprivation, social, economic and political.

One may ask why write on the issue of women's rights in Pakistan at a time when the democratic rights of the entire populace have been suppressed by a highly unpopular military regime which has next to no support among Pakistanis except for some right wing conservative religious elements, and from a handful of industrialists and large landlords. The reasons are: first, that because this regime relies on the religious elements the issue of women becomes a critical one, even more so than during other periods in the history of Pakistan. These fundamentalist religious groups, while ambivalent on other issues like the relationship of labourer and capitalist, agrarian taxation, and property, are in total agreement when it comes to the question of women. Women are inferior to men, they proclaim, so their place is in the home, serving their lord and master, the male. Secondly, women, for the first time in the history of Pakistan, are organising a mass movement to fight not just for the preservation of the rights currently under attack but for a further deepening and extension of those rights. As such, they constitute the group that is in the vanguard of the political movement

in Pakistan at this time, and need to be taken very seriously indeed.

At present, all political parties, with the exception of the Jamiat connected ones, are banned from holding public meetings. The left, which was factionalised to begin with, has seen a further retrenchment with its leaders and most active cadre exiled, imprisoned, killed or underground. Since the traditional bourgeois parties, the populist Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the left have all been pretty much reduced to individuals, this has meant that the only organised groups publicly taking a stand against the regime have been professional groups like lawyers, journalists and students.

The women's organisations have moved into the vacuum created by the absence of traditional political formations. Drawing on a membership that cuts across classes, they have challenged the regime and its henchmen publicly through forums, mass meetings, press campaigns, petitions and demonstrations. They recognised the importance of direct action at a time when the left was saying the conditions were not conducive to such action. Being part of no political party, they address women's issues but consciously link them to broader issues of economic privilege and deprivation, inflation, exploitation and injustice. The women's movement in Pakistan, like its counterparts in Latin America and Africa, does not designate man as the enemy but rather a social structural formation within which women are among the most oppressed though they are by no means the only ones to suffer oppression.

The Military Regime And Women

Ever since Zia ul Haq's military regime came to power in 1977, women have been one of the target groups singled out for attack. In March 1983 the Majlis e Shoora passed a law of evidence ordinance whereby the status of women is reduced to that of half a man in terms of her ability to bear witness in court. In case of rape, it is asserted that her testimony should be considered invalid. The murder of a woman is given a lesser penalty than the murder of a man.

This degradation of woman to the status of half a being, or even a non being, is merely the culmination of a series of attacks on women. Prior to this, the government issued other proclamations banning the participation of women athletes in international and mixed sports events, attempted to repeal the 1961 family laws ordinance which gave a modicum of security to women with regard to marital and property rights, announced its intention to eliminate coeducation and to institute separate universities for women with separate subjects and clearly a much reduced budget and consequent lowered standard of education.

Census data are used to justify the government's intention to drive women out of the professions back into the home. Government statistics in Pakistan, as in many other countries, provide a totally distorted picture of women's involvement in the workforce, and consistently underestimate their economic contribution. Apart from their contribution as domestic unpaid workers in their own household, estimates for the rural sector range from a

meagre 12 percent up to 80 percent in surveys done by women themselves.

The government sounds out its policies through the ultra conservative religious leaders. Thus the last two years have seen the emergence in the mosques and the media, television in particular, of *mullahs* proselytizing against women, and proclaiming the wonders of the Iranian model with regard to its position on women. This is exemplified by the *chadar aur chardiwari* controversy generated by Israr Ahmed, a member of Zia's handpicked consultative council, and others. Israr in particular was the spokesperson of the view that a woman's place is to serve and titillate the male of the house. She is designed to be an object of pleasure for her spouse as well as a beast of burden entirely dependent on him. Notoriously vulgar sermons in the mosque emanated from Israr. Pakistani women responded with anger, vigour and initiative.

History Of The Movement

The women's movement in Pakistan can be traced back to the pre independence period when middle class women constituted a vocal element in the anti colonial struggle as well as in the Pakistan movement. Many of the Muslim women involved in this process did not work independently among women but alongside other, often male, family members. Their efforts led to a recognition of their contribution by Mohammed All Jinnah, who made a strong plea for the removal of constraints against women. As early as 1944 he told men: "No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you. We are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live. You should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life." Viewing the independent state of Pakistan as essentially a secular state, Jinnah said that women had claims to the same rights as minorities, nationalities or other oppressed groups within the limitations of a

bourgeois, liberal, democratic state.

Following the creation of Pakistan, to which a vast number of those same *mullahs* unfortunately moved, the same women who had been active previously, decided to push their efforts further and concretise some of their demands through the legal code. Women were given the right to vote, but their ability to run for office was curtailed by a system of quotas set aside for women. Ostensibly, this was designed to ensure minimal representation, but in reality it was used as an excuse to deny women seats contested in a general election. Following a long struggle, they finally succeeded, under Ayub Khan's military regime, in getting passed the family laws ordinance, 1961. This ordinance



recognised women as rightful heirs of agricultural property under Islamic law, made second marriages contingent on the consent of the first wife, made divorce more difficult for the male and for the first time, gave women the right to initiate divorce, on certain specified grounds only. A system of registration of marriages was also introduced for the first time.

Never adequately implemented, this ordinance was nonetheless considered a major victory by women's groups. It was a recognition by the state of the need for reforms to better the status of women..Also, the women's movement at Pakistan's inception was led by middle class elements. Having received relatively more education than women of other classes, and being part of the political

mainstream, often related to men who were in politics, these women were cognisant of the law and were able to manipulate it to their own advantage. By virtue of the family law coming into effect *their* rights as women were safeguarded. Yet the law did not penetrate very far. Working class women in the urban areas were only marginally able to benefit from it to the extent that they either had middle class patrons, or that some progressive organisation was willing to take up the fight on their behalf. Rural women, isolated as they were from the political scene, continued to be in pretty much the same condition as before. The women's organisations existing at that time, the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), being the best known among these, were primarily social welfare and charity organisations and the nature of their work reflected this. In addition to providing relief during emergencies, taking care of the destitute and orphans, they placed a strong emphasis on education, but took a limited approach in its provision, restricting it to the creation of APWA college, and the setting up of a few vocational training and handicraft centres. Their attitude was paternalistic, their approach basically reformist, and their reach limited. In a sense they reflected their class position—altruism combined with reforms, tinkering with the system but never fundamentally challenging it.

The coming to power of Bhutto in 1972 saw the emergence in Pakistan for the first time of a popularly elected populist regime that drew support from workers, the rural peasantry and women. The 1973 constitution granted women rights closer in accord with United Nations stated principles, modified to fit Pakistani reality, along with a promise to extend education on a mass scale to all groups, including rural and urban women. Women's groups, though they increased in number during this period, remained in the background in that they did not perceive themselves as being under attack from Bhutto's regime. They chose, therefore, to exploit the favourable environment to push for an extension of women's rights within the

framework of the state, not in antagonism to it.

Not until three and a half years after the military take over in 1977 were women once again to emerge on the political scene as a mass force. This time, however, the organisations that came into being, though they have a historical continuity with the past, are qualitatively different in their emphasis and approach.

A Transformed Movement

The late sixties and early seventies saw a blossoming of intellectual activity and grassroots organisation, albeit in embryonic form. Women in larger numbers joined the profession and though their numbers were relatively small as compared to men, they made a significant contribution. Television in particular broke the taboos generally connected in Pakistan with music and the arts. College going women with artistic talents took advantage of this opportunity and became instrumental in portraying a different woman. A recognition of the media's transformational capacity may lie behind the current regime's attempts drastically to alter its programming and personnel.

The mushrooming of left wing parties in the late sixties and early seventies, tied as they were with the working class and the peasantry, drew into the political arena women who were previously totally dissociated from it. Not only did this serve to politicise more women than ever before but it also gave them badly needed organisational experience. Even though women joined the left, the position of different left groups vis a vis women remains unclear. Although in most cases the rights of women are formally recognised at a theoretical level, at the personal level where theory is acted out, a lot remains to be desired. Also, organisationally, left parties have reflected the male orientation of society as a whole in that few women have risen to positions of significant responsibility.

All of this past history cumulated and waited for the right conjuncture to express itself. The prelude came during the first few years of military rule during which the

reconstituted state came to rely very heavily on Islam as an ideological weapon. The three groups most under attack, workers, peasants and women, were not deceived by this ideological cover. Given that the state in Pakistan under the military has seen fit to take away the hard pressed rights won by all three groups under previous regimes, the linkage between the state which is viewed by most Pakistanis as the most reactionary, repressive regime in the nation's history, and the Jamiat elements, has served, in Pakistan, totally to delegitimise the fundamentalist version of Islam in the eyes of these three groups.

The current regime has denied to workers the right to strike. Among the rural tenants and landless labourers, too, there is a severe sense of deprivation. The fact that a tenant can today be evicted at will, despite laws to the contrary, tells him that the state is his enemy. Seeing the religious elements linked to this type of state, they are strongly in opposition to them as well. One would expect therefore that the movement against the regime in Pakistan would be composed of these three elements — the workers, the rural peasantry, and women. Facts show otherwise. Let us examine the specificity.

The bourgeois political parties in Pakistan are all top heavy and have a very weak mass base. Their ties tend to be more traditional and their programmes generally incoherent and opportunistic. This of course excludes certain groups from the minority provinces, especially Baluchistan, where, because of the nature of the national movement, these parties have a more defensible stand. The Pakistan People's Party which is still the party that speaks for large segments of the toilers, has seen its leaders killed, imprisoned, exiled. The left groups, which also had a base among the workers and peasantry, are in a state of disarray partly in consequence of the regime's manoeuvres, but also because of their own inadequacies, both theoretical and organisational. In other words, though the toilers in Pakistan show strong signs of dissatisfaction with the military and have

taken independent initiative on occasion in opposing the state, there is no organised group capable of channelling this discontent, and the leadership essential to such a movement just is not there.

In the case of women, things are different. All these years of cumulative experience provided the expertise that is now being put to organisational use, at a time when the situation in Pakistan critically demands it. September 1981 saw the birth in Pakistan of the Women's Action Forum (WAF), a mass based, popular front of many different women's groups, organisations and concerned individuals. The specific issue that saw the birth of WAF was a *zina* case, wherein a 15 year old girl was sentenced to flogging in consequence of her having married a man of a lower class background, contrary to her parents' wishes. This sentence triggered off a response among women, combining as it did issues of class, social morality and choice. Following as this case did upon the heels of news about women professors being molested and removed from their positions, women being tortured for their political beliefs and affiliations, restrictions on the professional activities of women, imposition of dress code requirements for women public employees, action was felt to be imperative. It was also recognised that help could not be expected from other quarters, either from the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) or the left, since these groups were fighting for their own survival, and had not previously taken a very active part in any national effort to push for women's rights. Women recognised that this was a fight they must themselves lead—that the need was to educate each other and fight for their rights, not only in response to the current barbarism inflicted upon them by this regime, but also to overcome inequalities that previously existed. Created initially by professional middle class women in Karachi in September 1981, WAF soon received the endorsement of seven women's groups. These groups, while maintaining their independent existence,

decided to rally under WAF's banner in a popular front dedicated to one common goal—women's development through the achievement of basic human rights for all Pakistani women. These rights are seen to include education, employment, physical security, choice of marital status, planned parenthood, non discrimination.

Recognising the enormity of the task confronting them, the organisers proceeded cautiously. Initially they devoted their attention to fighting to preserve rights currently held but under attack from the military. Given their limited numbers at this point, a lobbying cum pressure group approach was used. The first task undertaken was a national signature campaign based on five issues affecting women. Over 7,000 signatures were collected between October and December 1981, and the document was presented to Zia ul Haq.

Realising even at its inception that the state was unlikely to concede rather than token demands if it limited its activities to submitting petitions, WAF decided to broaden its base. Towards this end, in January 1982 the Karachi chapter of WAF organised a two day symposium on "Human rights and Pakistani women" with simultaneously running workshops on education, law, consciousness raising and health. This was the first of a series of symposia and workshops held on a wide variety of topics of interest to women in English, Urdu, as well as the regional languages.

Initially made up of urban based, middle class women, WAF also began to reach out to minorities, as well as to working class women. Their panels and workshops reflected this new membership by including such topics as inflation, consumer consciousness, the nationality question, the latter being brought up because among the WAF founders were Sindhi women who took this question very seriously.

While deepening its base, WAF was at the same time extending it. October 1981 saw the creation of its second chapter in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province.

This was soon succeeded by others in Islamabad, Peshawar, Bahawalpur, Lyallpur, Quetta, as well as a number of other cities. It was made clear that anybody who so wished could initiate a WAF chapter, provided they were willing to adopt the charter drawn up by the Karachi chapter. The activities of each new chapter would however, be subject to scrutiny by the two oldest chapters, Karachi and Lahore. If any discrepancy is seen between the activities of the local chapter and WAF's charter, that chapter is subject to expulsion.

WAF's chapters are also encouraged to incorporate as many of the women's organisations extant in each area, as possible, this with a view to extending the reach of the organisation, facilitating coordination, and avoiding duplication of effort. Being open to women from all classes, WAF recognises the centrality of

the gender question as a determinant in the formation of a united front for women. In their organisation as a mass movement, they constitute a dynamo in that their activities are constantly expanding, membership growing, and the base expanding at an accelerated pace. By virtue of this dynamism, emerging so shortly after their coming into being, WAF is clearly in the forefront of all other political formations in Pakistan at this time.

Not only is WAF a mass organisation, it is also democratic in its structure in that it is non hierarchical, and non bureaucratic. It has no president or secretary, and decisions are arrived at through discussion. A working committee handles organisational matters connected with different chapters, and each chapter sends a representative whenever all the chapters meet. In terms of its organisational structure, its membership and its



programme, therefore, WAF represents a radical departure from previously constituted women's groups in Pakistan.

Important Achievements

In its battle with the regime, the women's movement, on the surface, seems to have lost more often than it has won. In February 1983, 200 women demonstrated in Lahore against the proposed changes in the law of evidence. At least 20 of the participants were injured in their clash with the police, and another 30 arrested. In spite of this demonstration and the support the women got from men, the proposed changes were nevertheless rammed through the puppet legislative assembly less than a month later. They were also unsuccessful in their attempt to pressure the regime into sending women athletes to international sports events last year, specifically the Asian games in the fall of 1982. The move to institute separate universities for women and the dismantlement of the family Jaws ordinance have both temporarily been shelved, but it is expected that the regime will reopen these matters at a later date, in a manner opposed by WAF and other women's groups. The one big victory WAF has had in its confrontation with the regime has been the removal of Jsrar Ahmed from television, although he continues to hold his post as a member of Zia's hand-picked consultative council.

When one moves away from attempting to draw up a scoreboard saying "regime's wins, women's losses" which seems to be a fairly limited way of viewing the whole matter, the gains, though intangible, seem fairly substantial. Women have for the first time adopted an organisational stance which makes them an important force that any political group in Pakistan will now have to reckon with. They have broken out of the old pattern of reformism and paternalism which have characterised the Pakistani political scene for too long, and have initiated a process of education, organisation and informational work that will leave a mark on women for times to come, regardless

of whether WAF survives as an organisation or not.

In broadening and deepening its base, WAF has been conscious that it is not sufficient merely to critique the regime on the grounds it sets, but to deal with those issues that immediately touch the lives of the *average* Pakistani women who are not concerned with universities whether separate or coeducational, or with women's involvement in sports events, to cite but two examples. To this end, they have initiated discussions on topics of more immediate concern like child labour, growing narcotics use, scarcity of public services, suppression of women, crimes against women, all issues affecting the working class very directly. They have initiated serious research on the status and condition of women in Pakistan in order to concretise their position and work. In a public fashion, they have kept in the forefront the opposition to the current regime. To this end they have blitzed the media with articles, comments, enquiries, and in so doing have recruited more and more women into their ranks, as well as gained increasing support among men.

The task of organising women is much more difficult than that of organising either workers or peasants. One has to struggle not only against economic forces but also against the social taboos that have a strong sanction in Pakistani society. WAF's desire to constitute a mass organisation can be seen as a consequence of the nature of the question they are addressing, but also as a consequence of the lessons learnt from the past, where too often groups isolated themselves from the bulk of the population because of the rigidity of the positions they took. Such rigidity often led to the degeneration of differences into personal squabbles, factionalisation, and stagnation.

Some Limitations

We have earlier alluded to the mass character of the women's movement, drawing as it does women from all classes. This has been an integral part of the movement, though there is not always

agreement between the women who belong to the older women's groups like APWA which have a strong upper class bias, and WAF members who have either just entered the political current, or have had previous experience with different left group? The latter tend to view issues along class and national lines, and though aware that the gender question is a critical one, their approach to ways to resolve gender discrimination extends beyond that of previous group. Although thus far all these various groups have worked well together, it is possible that there may be parting of the ways when and the more radical elements begin to push for changes that are both class and gender based, and as means are sought outside formal structures. It is important to note that this division is not seen as immediate, but is merely pointed to as possibility.

The different WAF chapters are incredibly uneven in their membership composition, and this unevenness is reflected in their work. The Lahore chapter is clearly the most advanced politically, and more willing to take actions that chapters might back off from, demonstration in February organised by this group. The decision making structure is also subject to modification. Since there is so much unevenness between different chapters, there has some concern among the advanced segments in the movement that certain individuals in certain chapters might derail the movement by pushing for a more conformist collaborative approach. In order to avoid this happening, attempts are being made to restructure the internal organisation. The balance between democracy and centralism is always tricky one, and so far a resolution has been shelved. When the restructuring does occur, how there is no doubt that it will satisfy everybody, and its repercussions will be felt in the composition of the organisation.

Similarly, WAF has so far had no formal membership structure or elective process. Responsibility has been based on work contributed. Indications are that this matter too will be placed on the agenda this

year. The tenor of the movement will be critically affected by the path chosen.

What this unevenness and class heterogeneity suggest is that once the regime begins to take a more antagonistic stand towards WAF in particular, and the movement as a whole, there is a possibility that the more uncertain elements within its membership might choose to leave the ranks rather than engage in confrontational activities. The extent of this falling away is impossible to predict, since a large section of WAF's membership consists of ten who have previously had no political experience, and therefore not stood the test of time. There is no doubt however that some of the women with close ties to the bureaucratic elements, who are more at stake in the system, will leave.

Its urban character also means that the WAF, and the women's movement, as a whole, still have not been able to reach the rural women, who constitute one of the most oppressed segments of the Pakistani population. This is a shortcoming that will only be rectified as the membership increases, and a deliberate attempt is made to spread out into the countryside. Given the nature of the popular struggle in Pakistan, which has always taken its inception in the cities, this bias, at least in the initial phase, is to be expected. Also, given the linkages between the workers in the urban with their rural counterparts, it is expected that as working class women become more integrated into the movement's mainstream, this link will be made organically.

Inherent in the movement, as in other progressive formations previously existing in Pakistan, is a tendency towards tailism, that is, to allow the regime to determine the direction of struggle. The more advanced elements in the women's movement seem to be cognisant of this possibility but the newer recruits are so tied up with day to day reactions to the military's policies, that the wider issues and needs could easily be lost sight of. By letting the regime set the agenda, women will be permitting the forward motion to be determined on the terms of the state, and not on their own definition

of what needs to be done. There is a critical need, therefore, while responding to the day to day attacks on women's rights by the regime, not to let this sap all the energy. It should also be kept firmly in mind that a lot of these legally won rights really



mean very little in the existential reality of the bulk of Pakistani women. Transforming that reality necessitates educational and informational networks rooted in an autonomous women's movement. WAF is to some extent trying to deal with this matter by setting up legal, publicity and research cells, whose work will be to provide not only information but also the infrastructural backup needed if this additional information is to mean anything in concrete terms.

Certain chapters in WAF have stressed the non political character of the movement. This assertion, combined with the fact that the wives of many prominent bureaucrats and upper class males are active in its ranks, has to a certain extent contributed towards the tendency of the regime to allow WAF's continued existence in public. However there are indications that this is a fragile existence. The demonstration in February is an indication that the regime is becoming uncomfortable with the women's movement, and is beginning to see it as more of a threat. This is unavoidable if the movement is to continue to be dynamic. As soon as WAF sheds its

non political stance, there is every chance that the regime will ban it from meeting publicly and legally.

Future Directions

The women's movement must make a conscious attempt to keep from slipping into an elitist position, such as happened with previous women's groups. To keep the movement limited to the question of legal rights is to fall into the trap of letting the state determine its tenor. Even if these rights were to be granted, which admittedly at this point seems a pipe dream, we have seen that, as in the past, they will go a very short way in actually transforming the reality within which the bulk of Pakistani women live. In order to achieve real change, formalism must be shed, and an understanding of the nature and dynamics of class and national oppression as a whole must be developed.

The women's struggle in Pakistan, as elsewhere, is a struggle that will not be won overnight. Regardless of whether the military regime stays or goes, it is a struggle that will continue on into the future. The proponents of the women's movement must therefore prepare for an extended struggle. This they can do only if they develop the organisational capacity to deal with the possibility of a future when they are no longer permitted to operate legally. They can do this by forging close links with the most progressive sectors of society, and by maintaining their relative autonomy on the gender question.

Women in Pakistan, by taking the initiative in confronting the military regime in an organised public fashion, have shown their determination to be part of a nationwide struggle for societal change. They have denounced the regime's brutalities not only when they affected women but also other groups like students and minorities. The time is ripe in Pakistan for women to push for putting the gender question on the agenda of progressive groups. This is a strategic and a tactical question for both the women's movement and for the progressive movement in Pakistan as a whole. □

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