

Gender and Nexus of Purdah Culture in Public Policy

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ABSTRACT

The overt and covert form of *purdah*¹ culture has a reflective connection between the public policy and women's way of life in Pakistan. The underpinnings of the gender and nexus of *purdah* culture very intricately evolve in the formulation of the public policy. Reflections on the state of affairs in the country regarding initiatives about improving women status inform gender biases in development plans, lack of political will, lack of resource allocation, lack of legal instruments, ineffective judicial system, policies without crosscutting integration of gender and lack of commitment, implementation and accountability which does not bring the required results. This paper is an attempt to explore the interplay of *purdah* shaping women lives and cobweb of patriarchal values predetermining the social and cultural value of gender.

Rationale for *Purdah*

The rationale for observing *purdah* could be very complex and vary according to the class, region, nationality and culture. Broadly speaking, the categories could be: religious; psychological, choice of authentic dress; political, Islamization of the society; economic, status symbol and protection from public gaze. It identifies with the urbanization and social status; symbolic act of detachment from public sphere to derive respect for themselves and gain respect for men with whom women are identified, especially for working women; and 'escape' from strict attitudes within the family. The globalization and Muslim women returning from diasporas has influenced the Pakistani girls and women practice of *purdah* for reasons other than that of religious significance, they may do so to be 'modern' to keep up with latest fashions or refusal to fashion, which is also a source of power. From a feminist perspective, the motivation for the revival of *purdah* is that it acts as an empowering tool and has gained a different meaning in modern desegregated societies that is of both protection and increased freedom of action for women, linked with their identity, and access to public space for education and economic independence (Hosseini, 1996; Afary, 1998).

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The sexual division of labor places women in reproductive roles in the private sphere and men in a productive role as breadwinners in the public. The level of resource investment by both the family and the State is low for women. The complex set of rules which governs all gender interaction, is based on an institution called *purdah*, which is not merely a physical description of the veil or the homestead.

The institution of *purdah* has two forms:

The visible that is manifest in seclusion, dress and segregation of the sexes, and the invisible, which is prevalent in the underlying attitudes of society.

The control of women's lives by powerbrokers that use religion and tradition as their means to do so.

In conjunction, both of these determine the deprived status of Pakistani women. This regulatory discourse is enmeshed in both religion and tradition in an arrangement which buttresses the pre-existing patriarchal structure. Generally, the overt forms of *purdah* are apparent but covert government policies, which ratify the institution – (enforcing discriminatory policies) actually affect women's status.

Over time, due to large economic needs, shifts in the role of women and, thus in the forms of *purdah* have been observed. To maintain their standard of living, women – despite many taboos dictating otherwise – are compelled to meet day-to-day needs. In urban areas, as more women are creating their space in the public arena, increased political participation, segregated educational and training institutions, work situations, police stations and banks have been established but do not consider the female population adequately.

Statistical Profile

According to 1998 census, women constitute 48 percent of Pakistan's total population of 138.3 (and now 170) million. About 89 million people live in rural areas and 43 million in urban areas. In terms of this male/female ratio, the government needs to formulate policies and make budget allocations accordingly. But this has not been the case. The fact is, women are discriminated against and deprived of many basic facilities by decision-makers – who consider that due to the underpinnings of the *purdah* practices which determine gender spaces even women basic needs like health facilities, education, and employment opportunities are underestimated. Such socio-cultural disparities are further compounded by an absence of political recognition and public policy. Thus, the combination of the visible and invisible forms of *purdah* creates an interconnected web of deprivation, marginalization and denial – not only of women's rights for self-improvement, but also of their roles as agents of change.

Although Pakistan ranks 43rd amongst 128 countries in the Political Empowerment of Women but the country's overall standing is 127th out of 130

countries in new Global Gender Gap ranking. The report identifies gaps in most socio-economic areas of the country. Pakistan ranks 117th in both women's literacy rate and work force population; in healthy life expectancy, it is positioned 115th; enrollment in primary education ranked 110th and in wage equality for similar work it is ranked 60th and in labour force 121st amongst the group.

The educational status of women reflects deplorable disparities between men and women. While the overall literacy rate is 45 percent, 56.5 percent of men are literate, compared to 32.6 percent of women (Economic Survey 1998-1999, 1999). The meager budget allocation of the GNP for education and health are also not encouraging. Maternal and infant mortality rates are high due to the lack of basic health facilities, budget allocations are low, infrastructure inadequate, a lack of availability of medicine and doctors (especially female doctors) as well as the under-utilization of resources by the government represent a serious issue in the health sector, especially for women. According to the Labour Force Survey, the participation rates for women are grossly underreported by official sources of data (Ibid). The economic value of women's activities in the reproductive sphere and unpaid work as a family laborer in the production sphere has not been recognized as productive and is not accounted for in national statistics. The activity rate for women in the work force is 13.6 percent compared to 70 percent for men.

State and Gender Dynamics

Over the last 63 years, the dynamics shaping the relationship between women and the State have revolved around the 'imperfect nature' of women's citizenship under Pakistan's secular regimes. This has represented a violation of the constitution, which in theory awards equal rights to men and women, and Islamic Law, which actually determines such equality.

Soon after independence in 1947, in the process of developing its constitution, ambiguities rose about the nature of the country's Islamic character. A protracted debate started, which was reflected in the administration of legal, political, economic, judicial, social, and foreign policy (Esposito, 1980). And an unending conflict ensued between the secularists and religious leaders over the governing of the country (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987).

Life in Pakistan is governed by a compound legal system comprising of Islamic law, Secular law and customary norms, which creates contradictions and duality in public and private life (Shaheed and Warraich, 1998). The private sphere, which pertains to marriage, dower, divorce, inheritance, polygamy, custody and guardianship is directed by Muslim personal Law, and is further scrutinized by the prevailing cultural norms and political dictum. In the light of these dichotomies, which so ever body or forum has the deciding capacity in the cases of conflict, remains an unanswered question (Ali, 2000). Gender roles are

largely determined by culture, but Islamization plays a role in reinforcing traditional culture (Shahab 1993). The emphasis on a traditional role for women and the need to protect women's honor reinforces cultural norms that limit female mobility and access to the public sphere thus promotion of gender segregation and institutionalization of gender disparities (Jalal, 1991).

In 2006, the passing of the Women Protection Bill was a step forward in providing at least modest relief to rape victims to file charges under the criminal law instead of religious law. Still there are many aspects of Hudood Ordinances which are utterly flawed and should be repealed. One should also remember in this context, to mention a few cases, Safia Bibi, Dr Shazia and Mukhataran Mai, etc; most-high profile rape victims, whose stories touched the hearts of millions around the world have not been provided with justice. Another achievement in review of the Pakistan Penal Code, the Domestic Violence (Preservation & Protection) Bill passed by National Assembly in August 2009, lapsed after the Senate failed to pass it within three months required under the Constitution. The most recent achievement of women rights activists, civil society, women representatives and ruling coalition partners is the Act related with protection against Harassment of Women at the Work place and Criminal Law (amendment) which is symbolic and harbinger of major changes. In practical terms, execution of these laws depend on the attitude and political will of the misogynist elements, the implementers in the society. Generally, due to women's lack of awareness in relation to their rights, their suffering in matters of litigation is compounded by a biased judiciary, law enforcing agencies, a lack of female lawyers and judges, the costs of litigation and delays in the justice system.

Between 2001 and 2009, there has been an extensive shift towards decentralization. 17.5% seats for women in the legislative bodies and 33% seats for women in all local bodies were an attempt to bring politics closer to home which is necessary for shifting the balance between women and men by providing power and opportunity for conducting transformation at the grass root level. This has not been an easy sail as politics has been a male space and patriarchal structures are tough to serve. Women face discrimination within the political party's structures, because of the conservative feudal and tribal structures, a lack of financial resources, dependency of male members of the family and overall state of democracy. So women representatives have faced many obstacles from the process of election to sitting in the assemblies at town, district, provincial and national levels. The guardians of patriarchal structures who use religion as a tool do not even hesitate to kill women representatives besides creating all forms of hindrances in their effective political role. However, the democratic synergy and women's strong political representation has increased their visibility in public arena enhancing the status and change in social attitudes towards gender roles in governance. Recent research on women's parliamentarians' role in the assemblies has proved their pro-active role in the initiation of legislation.

Pakistan's government being signatory of many international commitments such as CEDAW, MDG's which requires enactment of national legislation and development plans. Women as beneficiaries were part of the Five Year Development Plan but since last three plans, essentially in which women have been considered as active agents in the process of development. Now gender is being integrated along with a chapter on women and development. This is an official endorsement of women's integration into national development. Policy documents and initiatives such as National Plan of Action, National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women, Human Development & Poverty Reduction Strategy, GRAPs were initiated for gender mainstreaming and to enhance women's status. Although, governments' empathy and misogynist mentality towards gender issues got exposed, when GRAP has been closed in the name of institutionalization. The Ministry of Women and Development which is without a minister till today, has limited staff and the only trained staff working for GRAP has been sent home (The News, 2010, July). For social change long-term initiatives need to be taken as three to four years existence of hiccup period of GRAP project had just taken off and only Punjab government had taken some initiatives under its umbrella in rest of the provinces just the seed were being sown. India took such an initiative about twenty one years ago with the name of Mahila Samakhya (Batliwala, 1996). The programme started with four states and now it spreads in sixty districts with total funding of the Indian government, as they are committed to gender mainstreaming whether it is female education, entrepreneurship, health, welfare, legislation, research etc.

For effective policy interventions, the planners need gender-disaggregated data which has a strategic role in establishing the facts about women and provide the legitimacy needed to redirect resources towards women's development. Supporting initiatives such as gender auditing of the budget and annual gender audit to map women's position in all areas of life could help to increase and redirect the financial resources to those areas where women are lagging behind. Although the fiscal reforms by preparing gender responsive budgets, the policy level commitment to women's development has hardly been matched with the resources, allocated due to the tendency of the government to push development issues of women to the back burner.

Gender mainstreaming need cross-cutting and systemic approach for engendering the social, economic, and political institutions/structures, which continue to produce and reproduce gender inequalities in spite of the affirmative actions. However, in Pakistan, planned development has failed to address gender inequalities due to the gap between policy intent and implementation. Lack of political will, weak and corrupt governance structures, limited technical and intellectual capacity of the institutions, and resource constraints have been the main impediments in policy implementation.

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Increasing the number of women in every sector are the real and crucial agents of change and the transformation can be witnessed. Their increased presence and visibility in public (male) spaces questions, even threatens, the hitherto existing gender order of the society (Mirza, 2002). During the economic transformation processes, new socio-economic opportunities are being created for women and through their agency. They are taking advantage of these to enlarge their room for maneuver and trying to define ways to embed the new spaces in the society at large.

Pakistan may look from outside very progressive in terms of women's rights. It is true that women have gained more seats in national and local-level assemblies and in the cabinet. It is also true that their participation in the labor force is increasing with many women holding university degrees and entering in both public and private institutions, including the army and air force. But this only applies to urban centers, in rural Pakistan-where the vast majority of the country's women live, men exert absolute control over their families; female children are less valued and cared for than male children and female literacy rates are very low. State sponsored efforts are needed to change the feudal mindset of people, settled both in rural and urban sectors along with the economic and political empowerment of women. Available surveys and news reports reveal that a large majority of women are also exposed to gender based discrimination in both rural and urban areas - domestic violence and harassment at work place are among the few that often go unnoticed as victims fear to be ostracized.

Women's issues have never been the priority of any Pakistani government, due to the compound nature of laws, lack of legal support, and male chauvinism. The tentative response of some regimes to form commissions has never materialized in the implementation of recommendations from advisory reports. The power politics of secular and conservative leaderships has also affected the liberalizing agenda of women (Shafqat, 1995). The frequent dismissal of elected governments has further resulted in the discontinuation of progressive policies (Kennedy, 1996). Any apparent positive measures for women issue are both political stunts and an eye wash as well as under some international pressure. Last of all, the war on terror has brought conservatism in our backyards and has influenced the psyche of the society and redefining of Muslim identity and reinforcing of *pardah* though necessitating many connotations.

In spite of the international commitments, a great deal of rhetorical attention is paid to the gender issues at the national level. There is a wide gap between commitment and implementation which is a grave concern of women activist groups, civil society, NGO's and now media is also playing role in persuasion of the State to translate its commitments to gender equality into concrete reality. The lack of political commitment to implement gender-related components of policies necessitates women's effective participation in the government structures to ensure the implementation of the policies.

Thus, in spite of robust evidence that there is some relaxation in *pardah* norms, the real change demands an attitudinal change at both public and private levels. In order to bring out Pakistani women out of the trapped web of dependency and subordination, structural changes need to be brought about not only in social and economic order but through effective policy changes and implementation. The representation in politics, state structures, and decision-making bodies is a must for substantive changes in development policies which could lead to shift in gender relations in the society.

The feminists in Pakistan have a role to play in a society in transition, which is negotiating a compromise between the old tradition of *pardah* and a modern way of life. Feminist activists need to sensitize the policy planners and public administrators to create an environment, which can facilitate women coming out of seclusion, by creating a social environment in which they can feel secure and comfortable in the public domain. A feminist's pragmatic approach to the question of a shift in *pardah* culture needs to be undertaken with extreme sensitivity, both at a doctrinal and a symbolic level. There is also need to inculcate an attitudinal change in the society towards women's changing role, which can be done through creating awareness through such means as formal education and the national media.

Note

1. A Persian word that means curtain, cover, veil, privacy, modesty and secrecy (Encyclopedia of Islam 1978).

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