

## Public Patriarchy: An Analysis of Women's Access to Education, Work and Politics in Pakistan

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### Abstract

*This article presents a review of the experiences of inequality and discrimination that most women in Pakistan face in accessing important societal resources such as education, paid work and politics in the country. The article is broadly based on Sylvia Walby (1990) concept of 'Public Patriarchy' in which she traces the transformation of male dominance from the private sphere of household to the public sphere of society and state institutions. The paper demonstrates that the various ways in which local traditions and norms of seclusion and segregation, family system and cultural ideals of femininity restrict women's access to acquire education, get paid employment, and take part in politics in the country. The article argues that sexist cultural ideals coupled with the patriarchal laws and policies of the Pakistani state put women in a disadvantageous situation which amounts to systematic and structural discrimination of women in the country.*

**Keywords:** Women, Patriarchy, Education, Paid Work, Political Participation, Islamization.

### Introduction

There seems to be a deep rooted “culture against women” (Kandiyoti, 1988) in countries like Pakistan where systematic discrimination on the basis of gender happens not only in the private sphere of the household, but its manifestation can also be seen in the public sphere of educational institutions, work place and other public spaces. Patriarchy, as defined by Walby, is a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” and which has its base in “six interrelated structures” (Walby, 1990, 1997). These six structures include household production, culture, sexuality, violence against women, paid work and the state. As can be seen for the list, some of these structures fall more into the private sphere (private patriarchy) while some of them (such as paid work and the state) fall within the public sphere (public patriarchy).

The private part of patriarchy has been discussed in detailed in an earlier article (see, Sanauddin et al., 2015). In the current article, we focus mainly on public patriarchy – those aspects of patriarchy which influence the status of women and gender relations outside the ‘*chardiwari*’ (four wall of the household). In other words, this article is concerned with factors restricting women's access to education, paid work and politics. It

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also analyses the politics of gender and national identity and the associated price women have to pay as symbols of national and cultural representation.

The discussion in the remainder of the paper has been organized in broader themes which include women access to education, women and paid work, nationhood and state laws, and the Islamization of Pakistan and its consequences for women. It has been argued that by systematically excluding women from important societal resources, the Pakistan state is patriarchal which, in the words of Walby, “sometimes promotes patriarchy through legislation and public policy, and in some cases, does little to end gender discrimination or to protect women from patriarchal control of men” (Walby, 1990).

### **Gender and Education**

Women’s access to education and paid work varies across different socio-economic classes and regions in Pakistan. Women in higher social classes and urban areas have more access to education and work compared to women belonging to lower classes and rural area. Unfavourable cultural attitudes towards girls’ education, lack of sufficient government investment, and the unstable security in the region have greatly reduced girls’ access to education in Pakistan. The long-lived socio-cultural belief that women play a reproductive role within the confines of the home leads to the belief that educating women holds no value.

In general, both culture and religious attitudes are in agreement over the seclusion and restriction of women which discourage women to pursue education or a career outside the home. As observed by Papanek (1973, 1982), the gender distribution of roles and spaces in households extends beyond the home compound, which has the effect of creating “separate worlds” for male and female. The concept of *zanana* (women’s spaces) and *mardana* (men’s spaces) which are primarily associated with home are also visible in the streets: in public spaces including parks and public transport, as well as all government institutions. Hence, there are *zanana* schools/ hospitals / parks and *mardana* schools / hospitals / parks, *zanana* seats and *mardana* seats on public transport, and *zanana* seats in the national and provincial assemblies. There are separate compartments on public busses (Ali, 2001), offices set aside for women employees (Mirza, 1999), curtained cars for women, curtained off sections of lecture rooms specified for female students, and some completely segregated institutions where men cannot enter (Papanek, 1982). The extension of *purdah* to public spaces marks conceptual and physical borders and draws thresholds for women (Mernissi, 1987, 1993), which limit women’s mobility and access to education, employment and training opportunities (Bari, 2000; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Rai et al., 2007). “A woman in the public domain such as employment and politics is considered provocative and offensive ... upsetting the male order and his peace of mind...If the woman is unveiled, the situation is aggravated” (Syed, 2010:159). This situation discourages women from education and paid work in Pakistan.

Although the government has declared that all children of the ages 5-16 must go to school, majority the 7.261 million out of school children at the primary level in Pakistan are female (UNESCO, 2011). Gender and regional disparity is evident in enrolment

patterns in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. A recent analysis of educational statistics in the province by Mustafa (2012) revealed that female net enrolment in schools was 45% in 2008/09, compared to 56% for males. Of the 154 colleges in the province, 100 are for men which show the unequal educational facilities and opportunities for the two genders. The disparities are greater between rural and urban areas (Bari, 2000; UNDP, 2008; Mustafa, 2012). For Pakistan as a whole, enrolment by girls in rural areas is 45 percentage points lower than that of girls in urban areas; boys' enrolment is only 10% lower in rural compared to urban areas (Lloyd et al., 2007). The on-going situation with terror activities in the region has also badly affected girls' education: the Pashtun areas are the worst affected by terrorist events, with "more than 400 schools destroyed" by the Taliban between 2007 and 2013, "70% of which were girls' schools" (The Guardian, 2012; also see BBC, 2013).

However, the encouraging trend is toward a greater number of middle and higher income women acquiring a university education and moving into professions such as medicine, teaching, and engineering (Qadeer, 2006). Women make up 43% of all enrollees in tertiary education, and, notably, the educational achievements of female students are higher than those of male students at this level of education (Bari, 2000; UNDP, 2008).

### **Gender and Paid Work**

Marxist feminists (e.g., Barrett, 1980) found the control of women's labour by men, their unpaid domestic work and exclusion from public sphere and labour market as the cause of women's lower status. Lack of education among Pakistani women directly translates into lower rates of employment. It has been argued that the structure of paid work is patriarchal because it forces women to engage less in paid work, typically earn less, and engage in different jobs than men (Walby, 1990). These patterns are found in Pakistan, albeit with some variations in degree.

Working women in Pakistan mainly work out of need, have gender-based wage disparities, are low skilled, are paid low wages, and have to bear the double burden of work along with domestic responsibilities of child care and household work (Mahbub-ul-Haq Human Development Centre, 2000:64). Gender relations (and gender inequalities) are reflected in the market and influence the way economic processes take place. Informal work in the home is mostly excluded from government statistics, leading to a gross underestimation of women's economic contribution. Women's traditional responsibility for the social reproduction of the family — often ignored in economic analyses — leads to different economic behaviours by women compared to men (Khan, 2007; Paul, 1992). According to a comparative human development and employment opportunities report for the South Asian region, only 15% of women in Pakistan were engaged in economic activity (Mahbub-ul-Haq Human Development Centre, 2004). This compares with far higher women's participation rates in neighbouring India (44%), Bangladesh (57%) and Sri Lanka (85%) (Mahbub-ul-Haq Human Development Centre, 2004).

A comprehensive study in Pakistan by Kazi (1999) explains that multiple constraints circumscribe women's work options in general. These are: (a) exclusion from more remunerative non-farm employment; (b) social mores regarding suitability of particular occupations in the eyes of family members and employers; (c) work in non-farm sectors further away from home and in nearby urban centres are not acceptable and are not compatible with domestic duties; (d) gendered work patterns that keep women in low-paying, low-status activities; and (e) restricted job options and low returns that inhibit parental motivation to invest in girl's education, particularly where resources are limited (Kazi, 1999: 387-88). In the urban area where women are found in the formal sector, Kazi (1999) further argues that cultural norms also explain the overwhelming concentration of women in the "respectable lines of teaching and medicine" as well as low social status jobs like sales and secretarial jobs which involve contact with men at a personal level (Kazi, 1999: 391). Women in the urban economy are heavily concentrated at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy – 35% of urban working women are "professionals, technicians and associate professionals", while in the informal sector they perform home-based and low-paying piece-rate work, including crafts like sewing and embroidery. Between these two poles women are only marginally represented. A general perception among Pashtuns is that women's employment is likely to have serious effects on their fertility and traditional roles as mothers and care providers in the family, and that it can also have an effect on men's honour (Akram-Lodhi and Haroon, 1996; Kamal, 1999). This attitude of the Pashtuns excludes women from having access to productive resources (Akram-Lodhi and Haroon, 1996).

Women in the formal sector face discrimination in employment and income as well as sexual harassment (Ali, 2001; Bari, 2000; Hussain, 2003). In the work place, there is pressure on women to prove their suitability for a job by showing themselves to be a good and modest woman. As explained by Syed et al. (2005), in response to different social and organizational forces and limitations, a woman in an office environment experiences conflicting emotions of fear, anxiety, shame, guilt, depression and anger while searching for a workable balance between defiance and compliance. To survive hostile work environments, women office workers use different strategies to renegotiate (public) space, and to de-sexualize and redefine gender relations at their workplaces (Mirza, 1999). These strategies include creating social distance between male and female colleagues (for example, by limiting their conversation to work related issues only, by not becoming too frank with male colleagues, and not participating in office parties), developing socially obligatory relationships (for example, by introducing their brothers or husband to their male colleagues, or by befriending female relatives of their male colleagues so that working relations become family relations); integrating male colleagues into a fictive kinship system (for example by calling their male colleagues brothers in order to de-sexualize the working relationships). They may also create women's spaces inside the office, for example by selecting an office space where there is minimum interaction with male colleagues or visitors. Some observers have also noted that the replacement of the traditional *burqa* by the modern *hijab*, a relatively recent introduction in Pakistan urban cities, has also provided a strategic advantage to working women as wearing *hijab* in the workplace (or university) enable them look 'modest' as

well as ‘modern’, i.e., ‘protection’ and ‘freedom’ at the same time, increasing their access to public spaces for education and economic independence (Haque, 2010; Afary, 1998).

### **Gender, Nationhood and State Laws**

It has been argued that the state is systematically structured in a way that its policies and actions are more often in the interests of men than women (Walby, 1990). The Pakistani state is no exception as it plays a great role in sustaining patriarchal structures in Pakistan.

An important aspect of state patriarchy in Pakistan is the ways it has used women as a symbol of national identity. As observed by feminist scholars in many countries, women have often been used symbolically to represent nationalist movements and identities. Women are often required to carry the ‘burden of representation’ of culture; they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of national identity, honour, and traditions (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Choo, 2006). In Pakistan “religion and women have always been part of the public discourses on citizenship and nation” (Jamal, 2006:285). Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has been struggling to create a shared identity among its various ethnic and linguistic groups. Religion has been viewed by the state’s apparatus as the only factor which could unite the 180 million people, and at the same time differentiate them from Hindus, in order to provide a justification for the creation of Pakistan. This amalgamation of religion with local culture – ‘religious nationalism’ – has resulted in a heavy burden for women (Shaheed, 2009). For example, in order to create a pure Muslim Pakistani identity, the state tried to ‘Islamize’ women first by banning the Indian/Hindu *sarhi* and instructed women to wear *shalwar-kameez* with *dupatta/chadar* (shawl). In other words, women’s bodies become a site for political contestations and boundary markers that visibly and structurally distinguish this ‘land of the pious Muslims’ from others, especially Hindu India. Successive regimes in Pakistan have often played the religious card in order to gain legitimacy and support by making alliances with right wing religious parties, whose first demand is to curtail women’s freedom by various means including repressive laws (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Shaheed, 2009).

Legally, women in Pakistan have to contend with a double status: the constitution of Pakistan on the one hand states that there should be no discrimination on the basis of sex; on the other hand, certain state laws are obviously discriminatory to women (Bari, 1998; Critelli, 2010). The constitution of Pakistan was promulgated in 1973 — generally considered a liberal period with the politicization of women — and guaranteed equality between women and men (Malik, 1997; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Article 25 of the 1973 constitution of Pakistan states that

“All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection before the law” and “Steps shall be taken to ensure the full participation of women in all spheres of national life” (cited in Critelli, 2010:239).

As well as this, Pakistan has adopted many of the international commitments to protect basic human rights and gender equality that are effective in providing a platform for

human rights activist and are useful in courts for advocacy and setting a standard against which to measure national laws (Rai et al., 2007; UNDP, 2008).

However, the equality guaranteed in the constitution and in international conventions is negated by a multitude of discriminatory laws and customary practices. Numerous commentators have observed that religion has been manipulated by the state in Pakistan and used for political purposes to either bolster insecure regimes or obscure vital issues of social and economic justice for the population (Jahangir, 2000; Malik, 1997; Qadeer, 2006; Critelli, 2010). Women have suffered disproportionately from distorted interpretations of Islam by the state (Malik, 1997; Critelli, 2010; Shaheed, 2009).

### **Gender and Islamization of Pakistan**

A major step backwards occurred when the military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq took power in 1979 and started an ‘Islamization’ process in the country with a number of ‘anti-women laws’ that were based on a conservative interpretation of religious teaching. This caused a reversal of the many advances that had been made by women. Summarizing the role of state and women in Pakistan, Jamal says:

“While “Islam” and “women” have always been part of the public discourses and citizenship and nation in Pakistan, this process intensified with the state-sponsored programme of Islamization ...[when President] Zia-ul-haq... introduced oppressive laws, particularly the notorious *Hudood Ordinance*, and promoted other measures and guidelines that have adversely affected the political, legal, and social position of women” (Jamal, 2006:285).

Women’s rights were severely curtailed by the discriminatory ‘*Hudood Ordinances*’, a law base on ‘Islamic Sharia’ that equated rape with adultery and disallowed a woman’s testimony to prove rape or adultery but instead required the evidence of four Muslim men (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2003; Jahangir, 2000). The Law of Evidence, enacted in 1984, requires the testimony of two women for that of a man. In 1990, the implementation of the laws of *Qisas* (retribution) and *Diyat* (compensation) further undermined women’s rights to safety and security by privatizing the violent crimes of murder and bodily harm and eliminating the possibility of state prosecution (Mumtaz & Shaeed, 1987). These laws created a loophole by which women can be killed in the name of honour without penalty because families, under the law, can forgive offenders and accept compensation (Amnesty International, 2002; Jilani & Ahmed, 2004). Marital rape is not recognized by the state. Even complaints against acts of domestic violence that come under the criminal law, such as physical assault, sexual harassment, battery, or attempted murder, are routinely ignored and often go unreported by police (Jahangir, 2000; Jilani & Ahmed, 2004; Malik, 1997). Women have also been raped, abused, and assaulted while in police custody, further deterring women from seeking help from the state’s judicial system.

When Benazir Bhutto became the Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988, many progressively-minded women were disappointed by her unwillingness to change

repressive laws promulgated by her predecessor (Laird, 2007). During her election campaign, she had promised to repeal the controversial laws such as *Hudood* and *Zina* ordinance that curtailed the rights of women in Pakistan, but failed to deliver on her promises despite ruling the country for two terms. Speaking in 1994 to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, she defended the traditional family structure, strongly opposed abortion, and accused the West of “seeking to impose adultery, abortion, sex education, and other such matters on individuals, societies and religions which have their own social ethos” (quoted in Turner, 2003:118).

While most Pakistani women suffer discrimination due to the *presence* of such state laws, some Pashtun women living in the tribal areas are suffering due to the *absence* of state laws. Apart from the four settled areas (provinces) there are seven Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) which have a special status in the legal and administrative system of Pakistan. Most of the affairs in FATA are run by local council of elders with minimal interference from the state. The police and judiciary do not operate there; instead, people in these areas run their affairs through their own centuries-old tribal customs of *Pashtunwali*. The minimum protection from police and the judiciary available to women in settled areas is not available to their sisters in the tribal area. For example, the practice of child marriage was recently banned by the government, but this law does not extend to tribal areas where the practice still continues. There is a secular constitution, religious *sharia* laws for personal issues, and customary laws of the tribal areas, resulting in policies toward women that are contradictory, inconsistent, and without substantive action (Critelli, 2010).

The clash between religion, customs, and state laws is not restricted to the Tribal Areas only. In July 2013, for example, the BBC Urdu service reported that a local council of Muslim clerics in district Karak passed a resolution barring the entry of women in the market during the fasting month of *Ramadan* for the reason that “their presence in the market without a male relative spread immorality in the city”. The head of the local police station declared that the resolution was against the state laws which guarantee freedom of movement to both men and women (BBC Urdu, 2013).

In sharp contrast to General Zia’s ‘Islamization’ policy and anti-women laws in the 1980s, General Musharraf used women as symbols for his “*enlightening moderation*” after 9/11 in an effort to present Pakistan as a modern, progressive state to the West. The *Zina* (fornication) ordinance was repealed and a “Women Protection Bill” was passed in 2006. Musharraf’s regime also encouraged the presence of women in the public sphere. For example, a third of seats in the parliament were allocated for women, and dozens of private TV channels were opened in which women were encouraged to become newscasters and anchors. Another landmark decision made by the Musharraf regime in 2002 ensured women’s representation in the country’s political structures through the reservation of 33% of seats for them in all three tiers of local government and 17% in the national and provincial legislatures. As a result, Pakistan ranks much higher than its neighbours in terms of women’s political participation (World Economic Forum, 2011). Seats for women were also allocated in local elections, as a result of which “more than

40,000 women were elected to the local government institutions and 205 in the national and provincial assemblies and the Senate” by 2002 (Bari, 2005).

Nevertheless, there are a number of institutional and cultural hurdles in the way of women’s political empowerment. For example, most of the women elected through reserved quotas usually belong to political/feudal families: they are the wives, daughters and sisters or sisters-in-law of those who are already stakeholders in the power structure of the state. In the assemblies, the “male members denied them development funds and expected them to confine themselves only to women’s issues” (Bari, 2005). Moreover, political parties are structurally patriarchal and non-democratic. In the last general election in 2013, political parties allowed very few women to contest the election, a reflection of patriarchal trends where women are kept out of the public space (Saleem, 2013). Right wing political parties are also hostile towards female candidates and oppose a female as leader. At the local level, many women are kept out of the voting process because they do not have national identity cards (a pre-requisite for voter registration). Community elders and local officials of political parties also illegally bar women from voting in parts of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Yousaf, 2013; Saleem, 2013; Bari, 2005). The electoral roll for elections held in 2013 comprised 48.6 million male and 37.6 million female voters, which means that almost 10 million females were not registered as voters (Yousaf, 2013).

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that patriarchal state’s institutions and policies contribute to systematic exclusion of women from important public resources. In the rural and tribal areas, local customs often prevail over national law and patriarchal structures are much stronger. The state do little to provide leveled ground for women in getting education, taking paid employment and other such activities. At the national level, religion has been used by the state apparatus as an identity marker and women being used as a symbol of national identity means that they have suffered the most from suppressive laws. Following years of campaigns by women’s rights organizations, there have been some positive steps taken by the government, especially in the sphere of political empowerment. The education ratio among women has also risen in recent years. Many women have increasingly been stepping out of their *zanana* spaces for education, work, media, sports, politics, and other such domains which have traditionally been associated with men. At the grassroots level, however, conditions are still not favourable for the vast majority of women in Pakistan.

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