



LUMS

Saida Waheed  
Gender Initiative

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# GENDER BI-ANNUAL



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# THIS ISSUE

**I**t is with great delight that we bring to you our eighth issue of the Gender Bi-Annual. As always, we bring together different disciplinary perspectives on a range of issues in an accessible and engaging way. In today's world, while gender becomes an increasingly contested category it is also an analytical category that deepens our understanding about society, community, institutions, and politics.

In this issue we bring you writings that discuss how gender is deployed to curtail agency and how gender should be used to analyse the legibility and efficacy of policies and systems. In Academic Work, our contributor looks at how respectability is deployed in the backlash feminist movements face in Pakistan and further gendered norms that curtail the agency women.

In Practitioner Voices, the first piece explores how breastfeeding needs to be incorporated in workplace policies and how a technology like breast pumps can create ease while also expose class differentials. The second piece draws our attention to how care work needs to be recognised and provisioned for in climate change policies.

In Gender and Design, our contributor presents research findings that unpack gender parity within higher education institutions in Pakistan and how gender equity can translate into gains for universities and educational spaces. In Student Features we have three contributions: a piece on the burden of dowries, another on how desire is seen in and shown by older women, and the last piece on reserved seats and challenges experienced by women politicians.

Happy reading!





**A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO**

# *‘Log Kya Kahenge’*

♦  
**MARIA AMIR**

- Fehmida Riaz (Faiz Kehnte)

“Kuch log tumhe sunjhaein ge  
Woh tum ko khouti’ delain ge  
Jo hai woh bhi khosakhta hai  
Is rah mein rahzen hain itney  
Kuch aur yahan ho sakta hai

Kuch aur tou aksar hota hai  
Par tum jis lamhey mein zinda ho  
Yeh lamha tum say zinda hai  
Yeh waqt nahin phir aega  
Tum apni karni kar guzro  
Jo ho ga dekha jai ga



It is no secret that Pakistan is a challenging place to live in as a woman. The consistent battle for acceptance, space, and agency fought by and over female and feminine bodies ensures that the country is consistently located at the bottom ten spots on various global performance indexes. The most recent of these being the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index (2024) where Pakistan ranked 145 out of 146 countries<sup>1</sup>. The WEF measures gender parity across four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

Despite such dismal records when it comes to women's rights, Pakistanis are often heard remarking how deeply they 'respect' women while touting that feminist movements are trying to upend local cultural norms because 'Islam already affords women all the rights they could ever need' regardless of whether the country can deliver on any of them<sup>2</sup>.

Much of the public revulsion against feminist movements such as the Aurat March and other feminist activists stems from the broad perception that Pakistani feminists do not respect cultural norms and are working to upend traditional values. Broadly, this charge rings true, given that much of what

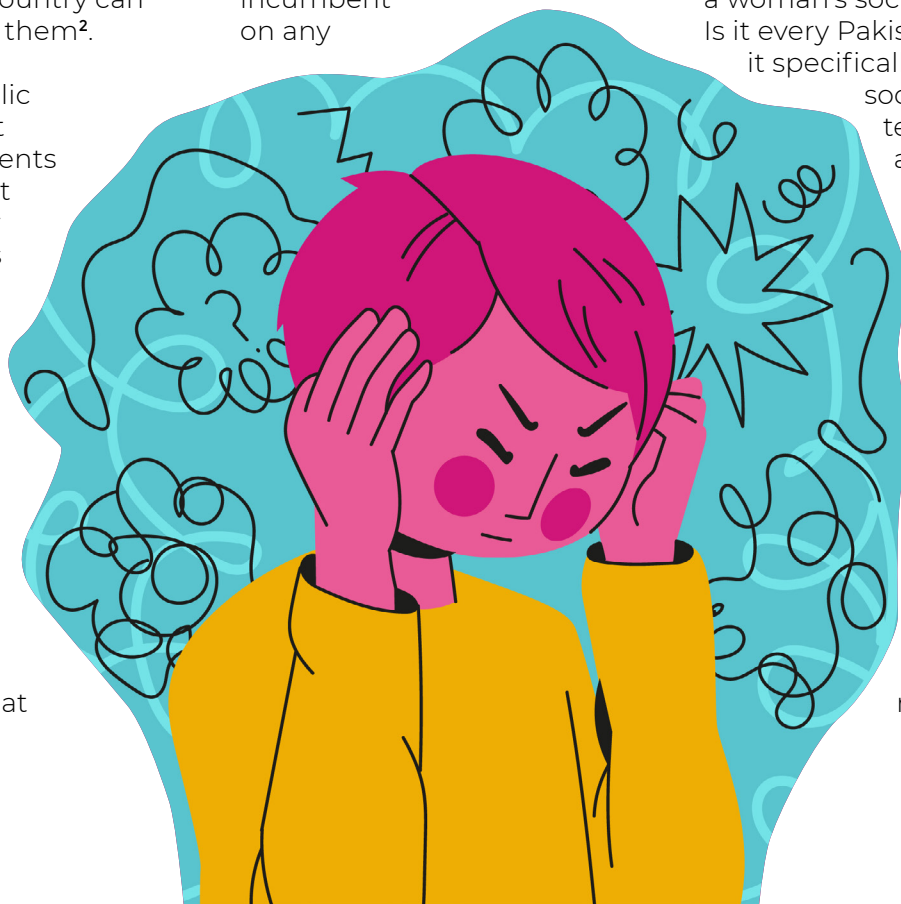
*There are many other peripheral layers of surveillance and control that fall under the policing ambit of Log Kya Kahenge – complete strangers monitoring women's bodies and femininity from childhood till their deaths – what they wear, what they say, in what tone and to whom.*

has been institutionalized under the label of 'culture and tradition' in Pakistan is repressive and violent, especially for women. Given this state of affairs, it becomes incumbent on any

feminist worth the name, to challenge and confront such norms. According to Gloria Anzaldua "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them<sup>3</sup>." One aspect of the reality that Pakistani culture communicates at every turn is the policing of social behavior through the refrain Log Kya Kahenge<sup>4</sup>? This phrase is used as a consistent litmus test for controlling and policing both respectability and piety across social classes throughout the country.

This makes unpacking how this phrase operates as both a surveillance framework and social control mechanism, essential for feminists. Who are log in this context and what do they say that impacts a woman's social position? Is it every Pakistani or does it specifically speak to

social peers in terms of class and ethnicity? What are the parameters for the performance of social respectability and who defines them to what ends? While it is obvious that much of the macro frameworks of piety – the control and regulation



of female bodies and sexuality, mobility, and honor frameworks are constructed by men, the task of monitoring women is often delegated to other women, especially women within the same households. For this reason, women tend to form the first line of defense in preserving the social status quo and worrying over a presumed loss of izzat in the face of any social transgression on the part of other women. Judith Moschkovich reflects on this dynamic in these terms, "Think of it in terms of men's and women's cultures: women live in male systems, know male rules, speak male language when around men, etc. But what do men really know about women? Only screwed up myths concocted to perpetuate the power imbalance<sup>5</sup>."

More than anything it is this extreme power imbalance that underpins the influence of cultural catch-alls like Log Kya Kahenge? Given that cultural piety is almost exclusively framed around female and feminine bodies, this framework allows men to define everything from who a 'good' or 'bad' woman is, to what femininity is and how it ought to be performed, policed, and propagated.

The first layer of this power defines how space is framed and the corresponding log allowed to transcend the public and private divide. Add to the mix the factor of

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precarity and safety, where women are generally rendered unsafe in public spaces by weaponizing the public/private divide locally known as the chaadar aur chardivaari and men now have the power to define which women are inherently 'good' or 'bad' based on how they navigate space. Once space is marked in this way, it becomes possible to weaponize sexual abuse, assault, and rape by socially framing victims of such violence as somehow responsible for what happens to them because they transgressed the boundaries carved out for them. According to Andrea Dworkin "Rape is the direct consequence of our polar definition of men and women. Rape is congruent with these definitions; rape inheres in these definitions. Remember, rape is not committed by psychopaths or deviants

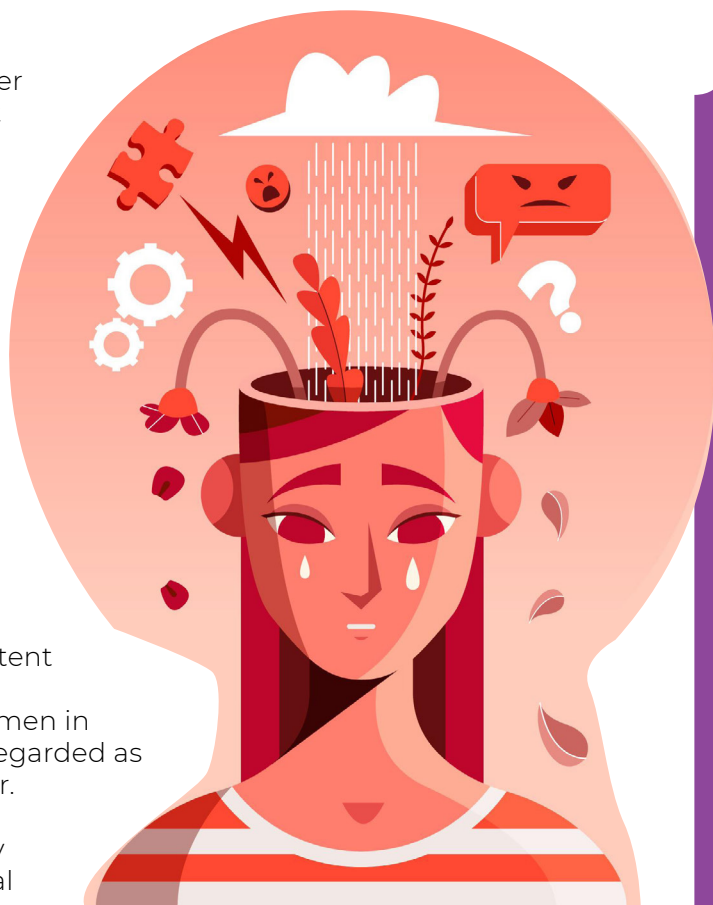
from our social norms – rape is committed by exemplars of our social norms<sup>6</sup>." Women who enter the public domain – markets, workplaces, schools and colleges are all considered to be taking a risk as men cannot 'protect' them in these spaces the way they claim to in private spaces. This framing of safety, whereby men cast themselves in the roles of guardians and protectors of women, protecting



them from other men, allows yet another layer of control and surveillance. This faulty framework inherently ignores and invisibilizes forms of abuse that take place in 'private spaces' where the framework of Log Kya Kahenge is rendered impotent because what happens to women in private is also regarded as a private matter.

There are many other peripheral layers of surveillance and control that fall under the policing ambit of Log Kya Kahenge – complete strangers monitoring women's bodies and femininity from childhood till their deaths – what they wear, what they say, in what tone and to whom. Young girls who have not yet formed 'their own' opinions and are 'easy to mold' are regarded as ideal candidates for marriage because the purpose of women in marriage is defined in strict terms to suit a social contract that generally only regards them in relation to someone else – wife, mother, daughter in law etc.

Ambition in women is universally regarded as an unattractive trait, so it must always be camouflaged and downplayed as accidental or secondary to more family-oriented goals such as being a wife and mother. In *Wages Against Housework*, Sylvia Federici writes "They actually



expect us to be grateful because by marrying us, or living with us, they have given us the opportunity to express ourselves as women (i.e. to serve them). "You are lucky to have found a man like me," they say. Only when men see our work as work – our love as work – and most important our determination to refuse both, will they change their attitude towards us.<sup>7</sup>" It is precisely such refusal to adhere to feminine roles designed in service of men, society, nationhood, and even religion, that marks women as social outliers that then need to be controlled and brought back in line through sociocultural inflections like Log Kya Kahenge.

The final and arguably the most pervasive layer of control that this policing proverb holds over us all is that of silence. Women's obedience and goodness in Pakistani

*"This framing of safety, whereby men cast themselves in the roles of guardians and protectors of women, protecting them from other men, allows yet another layer of control and surveillance."*

society is inherently gauged by their ability to tolerate all manner of circumstance from slights and barbs to abuse and invisibility, in silence. Expressions like 'Aik Chup Sau Sukh'<sup>8</sup> are reserved and passed on exclusively to and for women because a woman's silence is designed to absorb a man's aggression and anger. Log Kya Kahenge, is first and foremost, a silencing tool – a hush call that is located in the body. This is why women's bodies in Pakistan are framed as belonging to anyone and everyone – parents, partners, spouses, brothers and sons, the state, ethnicity and religion, complete strangers monitoring them on the streets – anyone, but themselves. It is why slogans like 'Mera Jism, Meri Marzi'<sup>9</sup>



are regarded as social triggers, because a woman seeking agency over her body is also doing so over her voice.

In the Feminist Killjoy Handbook, Sara Ahmed describes a scene at a table, where family gatherings turn uncomfortable because of the tension that women are expected to swallow and mitigate through their smiling silence. It is these tables and these conversations where

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'Haw Hai, Log Kya Kahenge' thrives as a social solvent maintaining women's silence in the face of slights, barbs, and dismissals. Ahmed writes, "To be unseated by the table of happiness might be to threaten not simply that table, but what gathers around it, what gathers on it. When you are unseated, you can even get in the way of those who are seated, those who want more than anything to keep their seats. To threaten the loss of the seat can be to kill the joy of the seated. How well we recognize the figure of the feminist killjoy! How she makes sense! Let's take the figure of the feminist killjoy seriously. One feminist project could be to give the killjoy back her voice.<sup>10</sup>"

Becoming this voice in the face of consistent attempts to silence women is an integral part of the feminist project. In Pakistan, this means, recognizing the fact that what people say is used as a prison to keep women in check and perennially bound to the existing social order. For anyone dissatisfied with that order, the only option is to accept the consequences of being framed as unlikeable and disruptive by the Log in question and foregoing Log Kya Kahenge in favor of centralizing one's own voice.



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◆  
HAREEM SUMBUL BARI

A mother is supposed to “get done” with procreating within the time assigned and return to work. Whether it is a woman in the more stereotypical work of being an educationist (mostly looked at as an “easier” job with lesser working hours) or the corporate workforce that gets the law mandated 3 months’ maternity leave, the allowances

for motherhood are finite in the eyes of state and society. There are smaller urban employers mostly including schools and education institutes that evade the maternity leave regulation or even if they provide it, they make the life of a new mother so miserable that she leaves work on her own.

Accompanying this external battle to make space for a small, demanding human being is the physical and emotional upheaval that continues within a mother. While she struggles to get appropriate postpartum leave and care, her body is going through quite a marathon of its own.

As mammals, lactation is an essential part of the motherhood experience whether a mother chooses to breastfeed or not. For those who decide against it, it remains a process that leads to the body slowly ending the natural initiation of milk production. It may take a week or a month or more taking its own

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trajectory.

For those who decide to breastfeed in any quantity or form, that is (i) exclusive breastfeeding, (ii) combination feeding, (iii) feeding directly or, (iv) exclusively pumping to everything in between, things are very different from those who decide to prematurely end this function or are unable to continue.

Initial days for this mother (given that we have a state mandated 3 month paid maternity leave which is soon to be extended to 6 months) are only comparatively easier while the breastfeeding journey is effectively initiated and well established. Once a mother returns to work, she currently has a few options. Where mothers choose to switch to formula and bottle feeding, their supply is at a heightened risk to face a sharp decline. Since the child is exposed to an artificial nipple, their latch on the mother's body also declines in efficiency again hurting the breastmilk supply. In practice we come across an array of situations which range from situations of gradual but complete cessation of breastmilk production as well as reduction in supply but continuation of breastfeeding from a few months up until even a year in some cases.

In cases where the mothers choose to keep their breastmilk supply and aim to continue to either exclusively breastfeed or breastfeed for the most part with minimal supplementation with formula, they usually resort to the usage of a mechanical breast pump unless they have childcare facilities available at workplace and the baby accompanies them at work. These pumps are available in





varying degrees of efficiency and while multi-user, hospital grade double electric breast pumps are the ones that usually sustain breastmilk output, there is an array of less competent pumps doing a sufficient job for many mothers. A good pump for single, personal usage will cost

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*An established supply will usually take a mother a lot of hard work because even the most top-tier hospitals will also have little to no breastfeeding support and initiate bottle usage even before bringing a baby to the mother for the first time post-birth.*  
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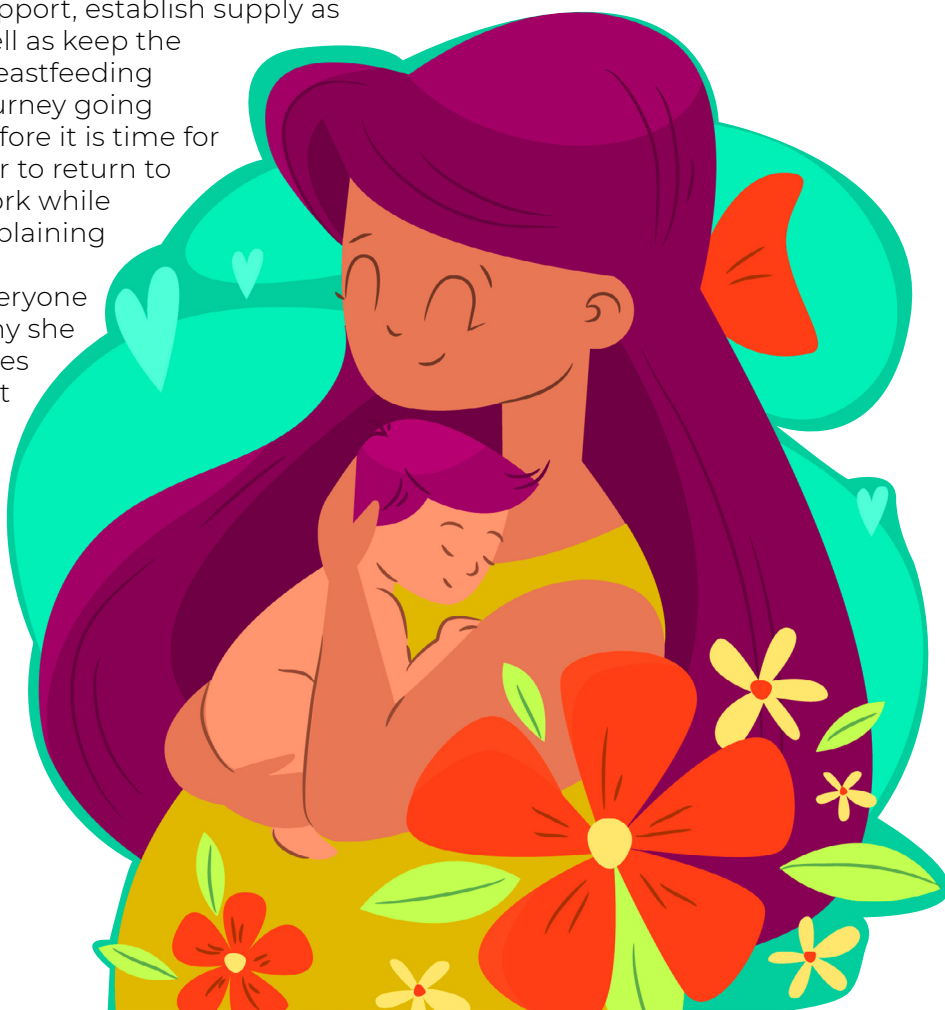
anywhere between PKR 50,000 to well beyond PKR 200,000 in a country where (sporadically implemented) minimum wage has just recently been approved to creep up to PKR 37,000. There are less expensive options but their reliability to support a supply is also directly proportionate to their price. Having said that, there are plenty of mothers using these cheaper pumps

and successfully maintaining their supply. Their dilemma is one of discipline. They can never risk missing a session. These pumps, if malfunction (which they often do after a certain time) or the mother misses a scheduled session, lead to decline in supply which, to reverse in most cases will require the Ferraris of the breast pumping world usually out of reach for mid-tier working class families.

The situation is tricky. The more affordable pumps will only work if they already have a good supply, but they cannot be tardy with the schedule. An established supply will usually take a mother a lot of hard work because even the most top-tier hospitals will also have little to no breastfeeding support and initiate bottle usage even before bringing a baby to the mother for the first time post-birth. So, the onus lies with the mother to get the baby back on the breast effectively without much support, establish supply as well as keep the breastfeeding journey going before it is time for her to return to work while explaining to everyone why she does not

wish for the child to be offered a bottle. Unfortunately, women who choose these science-backed approaches face a lot of push back from those in their close quarters. If a mother is able to sustain her breastfeeding journey up until her transition back to work, it is not a miracle but a show of sheer grit and resistance that often leaves her traumatised. That is an unfair baseline requirement to have of a woman to be able to do something as basic as breastfeeding that everyone so flippantly regards as the best practice for infant nutrition.

Once the mother is back at work, newer arduous avenues await her. The standard pumping schedule for maintenance is not arduous where a mother needs to empty her breasts once every three hours. This usually takes anywhere between 10-15 minutes per session. In a typical workday this will therefore only be needed a couple of times.



Frankly, people take longer, more frequent smoking breaks than this so this is an easy win for any Human Resources department where all they must provide a mother is a comfortable room with privacy. These are usually empty meeting rooms, prayer rooms or women's common rooms, in some cases equipped with a screen and an extra chair and table. Storage of expressed milk is done by using cold packs and cooler kits and doesn't necessarily require refrigerator space.

Despite this ease, a 2016 cross sectional study across employers in Karachi for breastfeeding support, only 15% provided breastfeeding breaks and less than 7% provided on-site childcare and other physical breastfeeding support services such as a

*In most cases, whether it is the pressures of household work, caring for older children or the essential work in the fields that waits for no one, they hardly ever get time to ease into motherhood and breastfeeding.*

child throughout the first 5 years of the baby's life<sup>2</sup>.

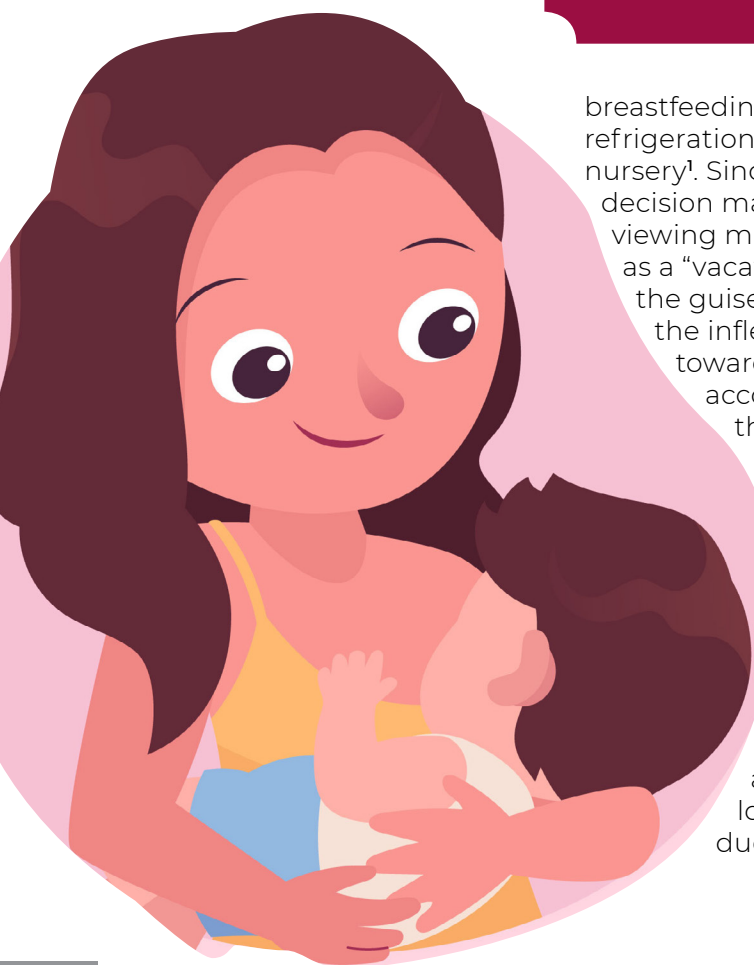
Then there are stay at home moms or mothers who work part time or work from home either due to the kind of work they do or by virtue of support from their workplace mostly from either high-level multinational companies or from the tech sector. The two of these categories forming a very small percentage of working women. While still responsible to do all the aforementioned categories of work, breastfeeding is comparatively easier for them to manage than the mother that has to work displaced away from her child.

However, it doesn't lessen the burden of the two kinds of work being assigned to them and expected to drop the ball on neither. They usually breastfeed directly every few hours given their working schedules or choose to pump during busier hours of the day.

breastfeeding corner, refrigeration, pump or nursery<sup>1</sup>. Since most of the decision makers are men, viewing maternity leave as a "vacation" already in the guise of procreation, the inflexibility prevails towards simple accommodations that can be made at work to support a working mother's breastfeeding journey. This promotes job satisfaction for the female workers as well as contributes to lower absences due to an unwell

The rural woman however stands at a constant handicap here. In most cases, whether it is the pressures of household work, caring for older children or the essential work in the fields that waits for no one, they hardly ever get time to ease into motherhood and breastfeeding. Neither do they have access to electric breast pumps nor formula in many cases and end up with moving small babies to cow's milk and water neither of which are fit for them and often lead them to diarrhea which is one of the notable causes of infant mortality<sup>3</sup>.

While the urban woman by access of medical facilities and pumps has an advantage over rural women, their psychological and social



dilemma often resembles. The community around them at work or home rarely understands the basic requirements to be able to sustain breastfeeding and then is very quick to blame the mother once it ceases

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*Much education is required in this regard for not just new or expectant mothers but also the public at large as to how they can support a new mother in this journey that across generations has become quite a puzzle to crack.*

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or slows down. The modern woman irrespective of her geographical location is stuck between a rock and a hard place and struggling

for basic needs to be able to do this very important work that lays the groundwork for her child's lifelong health and longevity, an instinctual need for a mother of any species to ensure. Much education is required in this regard for not just new or expectant mothers but also the public at large as to how they can support a new mother in this journey that across generations has become quite a puzzle to crack.

**Hareem is a finance professional and International board-certified lactation consultant with over 20 years of corporate experience and freelance consulting. Motivated by personal breastfeeding challenges, she transitioned to health sciences and now trains healthcare professionals, provides telehealth support globally, and operates a lactation clinic in Lahore.**



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# CARING IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

## WHY PAKISTAN'S CLIMATE POLICIES NEED TO ADDRESS CARE WORK

MYRAH NERINE BUTT

Pakistan remains in the top ten most vulnerable countries to climate change. The frequency and intensity of extreme climate events is projected to increase. These events are likely to hit the poor and vulnerable first and the hardest. We are likely to witness an increase of around 5 million people exposed to extreme river floods between

2035–2044, and a potential increase of around 1 million annually exposed to coastal flooding between 2070–2100.

We witness these drastic changes against a backdrop of systems and institutions unable to adequately support human health, livelihoods and ecosystems.<sup>1</sup>

Climate change has different impacts on people

based on gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity and (dis)ability.<sup>2</sup> Women are impacted differently by climate change in part due to their reliance on natural resources, disproportionate care responsibilities, and societal inequalities that limit their access to resources and decision-making processes.

Care is an important way in which people relate to

themselves, to others and to their environment. Caregiving includes household tasks like cooking, cleaning, collecting water and taking care of other household members like the children and the elderly. Women and girls perform the bulk of unpaid care work.

For every one hour a Pakistani man spends on unpaid care and domestic work, a Pakistani woman spends 11 hours doing the same.<sup>3</sup> This work is largely done for free and when it is paid it is highly undervalued. When care responsibilities are redistributed within the household, it is often the elder daughters of the family shouldering the responsibilities. This is probably why about 2 million more girls than boys are out of school in Pakistan—or about 12 million girls in total.<sup>4</sup>

Caring for people is ‘work’ which requires time and labour, both physical and emotional. Climate change intensifies the work involved in caring for people, animals, plants, and places and reduces the availability, accessibility, and quality of public services.<sup>5</sup> Climate crises often lead to scarcity of resources like food, and women, especially mothers, tend to receive fewer calories than other household members as they eat last and the least.<sup>6</sup> These crises lead to health shocks with often several household members falling sick or facing disability. This in turn puts an increased pressure on women as their time and labour spent caring for others rises. Crises also

make certain tasks such as fetching water, cooking, procuring food, and accessing healthcare more difficult on account of a breakdown in infrastructure and public services.

Caregivers in Pakistan in climate vulnerable areas are at the frontlines of the

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*During my fieldwork, I observed that that care is primarily seen as a feminine task with residual care responsibilities falling on the shoulders of other women in the household, particularly girls, crippling an expansion of life choices.*

climate crises. My research from Badin highlights how women are facing an increase in the time and effort they spend on providing care. Owing to changes in weather patterns, women have to travel further for water, work harder, and assume more care responsibilities. Seawater intrusion and rising temperatures are key stressors leading to acute shortages of water available for domestic consumption. In the aftermath of repeated floods and drought spells, the time spend on collecting water, firewood, and fodder and rearing livestock has increased. These tasks are intensive and adversely affect the health and wellbeing of the caregivers. Walking in the sweltering heat towards increasingly toxic and remote water sources leads to severe health challenges while also increasing the risk of violence as women venture away



from safe(r) spaces. Moreover, repeated spells of disasters also lead to an increase of their care responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> During my fieldwork, I observed that that care is primarily seen as a feminine task with residual care responsibilities falling on the shoulders of other women in the household, particularly girls, crippling an expansion of life choices.

Pakistan's national climate change policy recognizes these challenges and is

cognizant that women are likely to be strongly affected by climate change as most rural women are engaged in the climate sensitive sectors like agriculture and forestry. It recognizes that women are more vulnerable during extreme climate events and disaster due to gendered roles and division of labor. It recognizes that their care work increases in times of crisis. As a policy measure, it suggests that we recognize and value women's contribution in the usage and management of natural resources and other activities impacted by climate change. This analysis is sitting neatly and separately in a gender section of the policy and is not adequately weaved into other parts of it. We are likely to see this narrative remain in policy documents and not be translated adequately into meaningful investments. The Climate Change Gender Action Plan, which aims to operationalize policy measures and institutional processes that enhance women's participation in climate decision making, is also not care sensitive. It looks at disaster risk reduction, agriculture and food security, forests and biodiversity, integrated coastal management, water and sanitation and energy and transport<sup>8</sup> but there isn't a single mention of caregivers in the plan.

So how do we make our gender and climate policies care sensitive? The 5 R

framework for addressing care can be a useful framework to design gender-transformative care policies and programmes. The 5 Rs stand for **recognition, reduction, and redistribution** of care work; fair representation of Care workers in decision making and fair **reward** to be paid for Care work. This care lens will allow for an intersectional-relational understanding of gender and would enable interventions to directly serve the needs of communities they hope to target. Efforts to respond to climate change will not be socially just unless the value of care work and the needs, experiences, and knowledge of carers are included at all stages.

A Care centered view recognizes care as a public good that is essential for sustaining human lives and economies. Policies and programmes need to redistribute care work so that it is not seen as women's work or treated as a free 'natural resource to be exploited. It needs to be seen as 'productive work' to be shared between the household, communities, state and the market.

A care lens would ideally lead to investments in accessible and affordable high-quality care

*In the aftermath of repeated floods and drought spells, the time spend on collecting water, firewood, and fodder and rearing livestock has increased.*





services and infrastructure as part of climate investments. This means investment in public infrastructure such as better roads and transport, affordable electricity, functioning health and education systems, free water and sanitation and other essential facilities that reduce care work. To address the nexus of climate and care, we need publicly funded creches, child and elder care, and early childhood education. This would redistribute part of the responsibilities to the state.

A care sensitive approach calls on expanding social protection programs including food subsidies, cash transfers, health and social insurance, and welfare programs as an essential support to a caring society. Increasing the representation of carers and enabling their active participation and leadership is an important strategy for designing care responsive interventions.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, care jobs need to be rewarded fairly. Care jobs like domestic work, nursing, teaching have a minimal carbon footprint and are 'green jobs' as they centre the needs of people and the planet.

Caregiving fosters both nature and nurture. Without a care lens in climate policy the climate crisis will widen existing inequities and leave our women, both young and old, further behind. The current global focus on galvanizing climate investments presents us with a unique opportunity to address both care and how people cope with increasing climate crisis.



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*Women are impacted differently by climate change in part due to their reliance on natural resources, disproportionate care responsibilities, and societal inequalities that limit their access to resources and decision-making processes.*  
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**Myrah Nerine Butt is the Gender Justice Policy and Advocacy Manager at Oxfam Asia. Her key areas of focus include care work, climate change, disaster risk reduction, and enhancing citizen voice and accountability.**

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# SHATTERING THE GLASS CEILING

NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF GENDER  
EQUITY IN PAKISTANI HIGHER EDUCATION

FARAH NADEEM

**T**he pursuit of gender parity in education remains a persistent challenge in Pakistan, with women facing significant obstacles in achieving equal representation and opportunities. This struggle is particularly pronounced within higher education, where women are underrepresented among faculty, especially at senior

levels<sup>1</sup>. This disparity not only affects individual careers but also perpetuates systemic biases and limits the potential for a genuinely inclusive academic environment.

Like their female colleagues globally, women in Pakistan experience the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon, often facing increasing obstacles as they progress in





their careers, particularly in academia. Women face unique barriers as they move up the academic ladder - for example, in balancing family commitments and care-giving roles with maintaining the rigorous requirements of a career in academia or finding access to formal and informal networking opportunities and mentoring as readily as their male counterparts and battling gender stereotypes and implicit biases<sup>2</sup>. The underrepresentation that results from the leaky pipeline phenomenon not only deprives women of opportunities but also limits the diversity of perspectives and role models available to students.

Recent research at a private university in Pakistan sheds light on the complex factors contributing to gender inequity within academia. Through a comprehensive study involving policy reviews, surveys, and interviews, researchers uncovered a nuanced picture of the

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*While the overall proportion of female Ph.D. faculty in the university aligns with the national average (27%), their numbers dwindle significantly at the Associate and Full Professor levels.*  
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challenges and opportunities faced by female faculty

members. While progress has been made in certain areas, deeply ingrained biases and structural barriers continue to hinder women's advancement.

One striking finding is the stark disparity in representation at higher academic ranks. While the overall proportion of female Ph.D. faculty in the university aligns with the national average (27%), their numbers dwindle significantly at the Associate and Full Professor levels. This indicates that the leaky pipeline is also prevalent in this context. The study also revealed a subtle form of gender bias in workload allocation. While there were no significant salary differences based on gender, women often found themselves shouldering a heavier burden due to gendered expectations. They were more likely to take on service-oriented tasks and care-related responsibilities, which, while crucial to the functioning of the institution, are often



undervalued in promotion criteria. This creates a double bind for women, who must navigate both the demands of their academic work and the often-unrecognized labor that contributes to the smooth running of the university. Beyond workload, the research highlighted the importance of institutional support and a culture of inclusion. The presence of childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, and supportive leadership were crucial factors enabling women to balance their personal and professional lives. However, the study also revealed a lack of formal policies and initiatives specifically designed to address gender disparities and promote women's advancement into leadership positions - which itself is indicative of the fact that simply not enough women find themselves in positions that allow them to lend their weight to affect policy change at that level.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Institutions must actively work to dismantle

“*Like their female colleagues globally, women in Pakistan experience the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon, often facing increasing obstacles as they progress in their careers, particularly in academia.*”

Whereas individual women appear to be the primary beneficiaries of truly inclusive workspaces, it is the universities that stand to gain the most by taking proactive steps to promote gender equity and fostering more dynamic academic environments.

Institutions can garner significant reputational gain through their inclusive practices and commitment to gender equity - but more importantly, the fact that they are significantly enriched by the diversity in perspective, development, and talent speaks volumes for the intrinsic value of pursuing equitable practices. Allowing its student body to benefit from exposure to diverse role models and a more equitable learning environment will improve student success markedly and will foster stronger communities that value diversity rather than exclusivity.

It is time to shatter the glass ceiling and ensure that every member of the academic community has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the advancement of knowledge, particularly in the space of higher education in Pakistan.

**Farah Nadeem is an assistant professor at the School of Education and the Director of the Office of Accessibility and Inclusion at LUMS. She conducts research on evidence-informed policy and practice in education, with a focus on equity and inclusion.**



systemic biases, promote transparency in evaluation and promotion processes, and create a culture that values and recognizes the contributions of all faculty members, regardless of gender. This includes providing adequate support for work-life balance, offering formal institutional mentorship and leadership development opportunities for women, and ensuring women's voices are heard and respected in decision-making processes.

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# DOWRIES OR DEGREES

Analysing how the Economics of Marriage Turn Burdens into Brides

HAREEM HASSAN KHAN

**C**loaked in the blood of women murdered for 'honour', pierced by the screams of women subjected to domestic violence, and pleased with the minimal economic

independence for women, the Thomson Reuters Foundation recognized Pakistan as the 6th most dangerous country for women in the 2018 survey<sup>1</sup>.

According to the International Labour Organization, as of 2021, only 24.5% of the women were employed in the formal sector of Pakistan<sup>2</sup>. Financially and socially dependent on men, women suffer in every aspect hence, for many poverty stricken and



uneducated households, marriage remains as the best option for economic relief. Thus, girls are groomed for marriage since childhood in accordance with the preferences of the eligible men and their families.

Marriage as an economic proposition leads to a lower age at first marriage for women, as men generally prefer younger brides due to their fertility, youth, and impressionable personalities. The bride's family prefers marrying their daughters off at a younger age to increase the number of suitable marriage proposals, potentially reduce the amount of dowry to be given, and rid themselves of the economic burden of feeding and clothing the girl as soon as possible. As per UN Women, Pakistan has the 6th highest number of girls married before the age of 18<sup>3</sup>.

However, a lower age at first marriage results in a deliberate lower level of education for girls, leading to a lack of relevant skillset for the formal labour market hence, reducing their chances of employment, and ensuring women's dependence on men and the future poverty of the household as well, since the full economic potential of all the household members is not being realized. This also contributes to women having a lower threat point in their marriages due to their limited education and financial contribution to the household, as exemplified by the DHS Dataset 2018, which highlights that only 13.5% of early married women were employed in technical roles due to a lack of relevant skillset<sup>4</sup> hence, directly

*“Ironically, Pakistani society does attempt to ensure women's autonomy in their marriages, and eventually society, by adorning and embellishing this downward spiral, through investing in their dowries instead of their education.”*

resulting in lower autonomy in society as a whole. Such a cyclical relationship steered by an economic basis continues to negatively impact the development cycle of Pakistan in every aspect, be it economically or socially.

Ironically, Pakistani society does attempt to ensure women's autonomy in their marriages, and eventually society, by adorning and embellishing this downward spiral,

through investing in their dowries instead of their education. However, dowries as a solution serve as further encouragement towards early marriage, as a lower dowry may be acceptable to the groom and his family in return for a younger bride. Thus, continuing the wretched cycle which perceives women as social and economic liabilities not worth investing years of education in, which will subsequently reduce their fertility window as well, especially if they join the formal labour force. Although dowry may appear to protect women's rights under a weak legal system, it must be considered that dowry payments may backfire if the





husband ends up controlling the assets and funds, drastically raising the chances of domestic violence. Plus, dowry payments impoverish the bride's family, further strengthening the economic basis for such gender discrimination and poverty within our society<sup>5</sup>.

Dowries and early marriages highlight how our priorities

are out of order, which is the reason why such a downward spiral continues. Prioritising women's marriages and men's demands over women's education and well-being for limited and short-term economic gain is one of the many reasons why our country ranks so abysmally in women's rights indexes. Investing in girls' education and encouraging female labour force participation is the apparatus required to break the generational trauma and the systematic cyclical abuse in order to pull ourselves out of the glittery and shiny downward spiral accessorized with red lehengas, gold jewelry, bedroom furniture sets, cars, and kitchen appliances.



“  
*Marriage as an economic proposition leads to a lower age at first marriage for women, as men generally prefer younger brides due to their fertility, youth, and impressionable personalities.*  
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**Hareem Hassan Khan is a 2024 LUMS graduate with a degree of BSc (Hons). Economics and Political Science with a particular interest in development economics and international relations. She works as a research assistant at IDEAS and hopes to contribute to the development of society however possible.**

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# EXPLORING DESIRE IN OLDER WOMEN

—◆—  
AIZA NADEEM

*'Beta, ab kya faida lipstick laganay ka. Zindagi tou khatam hogayi hai aur sach boloun tou siraf shohar kay liyey hi pehani chahiyye'* (Child, what is the point of putting on lipstick now? Life has ended and truth be told, lipstick was only really meant to be worn for one's husband).

My dadi, quoted above, always maintained that a woman's life was relevant only so far as she could present her usefulness to her male relatives through labor of some sorts. The idea of the woman, as a sexual and desiring person, outside of the confines of kinship appeared to be an absurd provocation. A woman's life was strictly outlined into distinct phases where the appropriate time for the expression of desire and intimacy would be within the confines of a heterosexual marriage up until child-rearing

capacities ceased to exist. Sexuality may not be expressed or articulated outside of the confines of these strictly regulated channels.

If being desired and to desire is to feel alive, I became interested in understanding the spaces which older women<sup>1</sup> have, to articulate and experience desire despite the restrictions placed by a hetero-patriarchal structure<sup>2</sup>. My interest in this subject stems from the way in which it is projected that once women reach a certain age they no longer have the space and will to articulate desire. Linked to a "sexual



eunuch”<sup>3</sup> and relegated to a subject who does not want and cannot want, this project is interested in locating women who are able to resist such a casting.

A critical part of the quest of understanding the way desire is articulated amongst women is the way it is embedded in the process of marriage. Marriage is seen as the only appropriate vessel where desire may be expressed and actualised for women. This is where women become sexual persons and are able to access different forms of desire and also non-sexual intimacy. A critical way in which this manifested is how I was not allowed access to some conversation amongst women around sex, due to my status as an unmarried person.

Ensuring that marriage is the only vessel which women have, to express desire is sustained through the regulation of bodies, sexuality, and the control of the public/private divide which ensures women have limited access to space which may allow them to express desires outside of the ambit of marriage. In my research, an example which illustrated the limitations of marriage, was how desire expressed outside of it was frowned upon.

Rani, 51, became a fan of the K-pop band BTS, a few years ago. She joined the ARMY, which is their dedicated fan community. In her own words, she found friendship and contentment in the ARMY as she was able to spend time for herself, away from the burdens of household responsibility. This was not received positively by her family. Aside from embarrassment and admonishment from her sons and husband, there have been occasions where she

describes feeling ostracized for her connection with BTS. In particular, she remembers an incident where her cousin’s husband exchanged concerned glances with her own husband upon seeing a BTS sticker on her phone. All of this points to the way in which she is being chastised for expressing desire which is outside of the restraints of marriage and what her role as a mother and wife dictates for her.

Another factor which the research aimed to explore was understanding the way in which desire is articulated amongst women in spaces which are receptive to it.

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*In my research, an example which illustrated the limitations of marriage, was how desire expressed outside of it was frowned upon.*  
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The first form of examination for this occurred through literary analysis where the language which was used in texts for the description of desire was analysed. Potent examples of this were tappay<sup>4</sup>, which represent how women are able to express desire in veiled forms using innuendo and metaphors. Similarly,

in texts such as Lihaaf, there is evidence of a language used among women for communication of desire and intimacy in the domestic sphere which is different from the formalized language used outside. In my research, this use of language which was particular to the insular spaces occupied by women was a recurrent theme.

One of the participants, who I extensively worked with, invited me to lunch with her women friends. A widow with two sons, she had limited space in her own house to express or articulate desire in any of the forms outlined before. These meetings with her friends represented an outlet where she could imagine possibilities of an alternate life and deliberate on what made her feel alive. The way these women discussed sexual desire was interesting. It involved the use of language loaded with innuendo which appeared to be cultivated through years of conversation and inter-textual knowledge of said innuendo. For instance,





analogies made about shifting beds and sharing teacups were references to sex which a trained ear could discern. These seemingly simple acts appeared to signal a level of intimacy which implied sexual activity. Only a fully indoctrinated member of the group could appreciate and contribute to these conversations.

In her book, *Impossible Desires*,<sup>5</sup> Gopinath centers diasporic queer female subjectivity to counteract its constitutive absence in dominant South Asian nationalist and diasporic discourses. For this, Gopinath focuses on the film, *Beautiful Laundrette* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1985), about queer interracial desire in Thatcherite Britain. The film is a story revolving around a Pakistani immigrant and his white love interest. Gopinath writes that 'queer

female diasporic subjectivity remains unthinkable not only within dominant nationalist and diasporic discourses but also within some gay male, as well as liberal feminist, rearticulations of diaspora'. While Gopinath locates Tania (the older woman in the film) as the desiring female subject that cannot be accommodated by the film, the desire of the older female subjects is itself foreclosed.

When depicting the older women, creative reserves seem to dry up, which is evident by the way Tania is depicted as an antagonist for the main leads in the film. By homing in on the queer female subject through Tania, Gopinath begins to capture how sexuality is constructed in South Asia and obscures other narratives of circumscribed desire. This offers a fitting conclusion to this research

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by highlighting the exciting possibility of further research into the field of feminine desire, particularly through an older subject and how it can offer a more expansive understanding of sexuality in South Asia.

**After graduating with a degree in History, Aiza Nadeem now works as part of the Mahbub ul Haq Research Centre while continuing to work on projects which critically examine gender and sexuality.**



1. I deliberated on the definition of who exactly qualifies as an older woman for the purposes of this project. Eventually I settled on women who are aged 50+. This made sense to me because women who are younger may still have access to public space or community through a work-based community, or through their children, family, etc. Most of the women who I was able to interview were generally women who had been widowed or were unmarried and were seen as having an excess of desire. The sample was admittedly diverse and their willingness to speak with me depended on how they connected to me
2. By desire, I mean sexual desire, interest in hobbies which feel enriching, or the desire for an alternate life. The reason for choosing such an expansive definition is that just a lot of forms of expression from women at that age are seen as an affront to the larger heteropatriarchal matrix or mocked and focusing just on sex seemed limiting and possibly reinforcing a lot of the same notions which I set out to dismantle since it assumes desire has only one expression.
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4. Tappay refer to semi-classical folk music, primarily sung by women in group gatherings.
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# Evaluating the Role of RESERVED SEATS FOR WOMEN in Lawmaking

MOHAMMAD OWAIS SABRI

**I**n July 2024, the Supreme Court in a landslide judgement, declared PTI eligible for reserved seats in the parliament. If you are interested in colloquial dinner-table conversations about politics or if you follow popular political

discourse on social media, there is a big chance that you have come across strong opinions about these reserved seats, opinions which this verdict has brought to the forefront once again. If we are to truly believe that democracy is an iterative process





Image: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2342240/gender-politics-prevail>

and that it is supposed to evolve through feedback, then public opinion's condemnation of reserved seats system makes it a relic of the past, specifically when it comes to improving women's representation in the parliament. However, public opinion is not always informed by the fact of the matter; even then it is easily swayed. For a better understanding of how reserved seats function and

where they stand in the current political status quo of Pakistan, it is important to understand how they work and why they are so disliked amongst the general public.

The current reserved seat system works through party lists, where political parties submit ordered lists of nominees for the reserved seats. Parties are then awarded reserved seats proportionally, based on the number of seats they win in the general elections. This selection process is the first thing a lot of people take issue with: "Why are unelected members allowed to be a part of the country's law-making body?", is often the question asked on social media by people critical of the system.

In fact, as we will see later in this piece, this opinion proliferates the political class of Pakistan too. If we are to strictly talk about the importance of these seats in providing representation, there is no doubt that this system is crucial in getting women through the door. In fact, in the 2018 General Elections, 60 out of a total of 69 women parliamentarians were elected on reserved seats<sup>1</sup>.

Unfortunately, the current

electoral status quo does not seem to have space for women politicians. This is evident from the incredibly small percentage of women in parliament which are coming in on regular seats. Seeing this, perhaps the question to ask is not whether unelected women should be allowed in the parliament, but whether this nomination process is fair and allows for equitable representation. To understand this, I conducted several interviews with politicians who understand the inner workings of the nomination process and a small survey which allowed me to understand the opinion of the general public.

Through the testimonies I gathered, the general understanding of the nomination process was that it is often marked by personal incentives and informed by personal connections within the party. When asked about the nomination process, the General Secretary for PMLN in Karachi said: "The best-case scenario is that these seats go to members who have been active in mobilizing the party throughout the previous electoral cycle. However, oftentimes these nominations go to women who have some ties to the men already active in the party, or to

“Why are unelected members allowed to be a part of the country's law-making body?”, is often the question asked on social media by people critical of the system.



women who are somehow connected to the funds coming into parties.” Other testimonies from political entrepreneurs also suggest that a lot of nominations are provided to family members of already existing parliamentarians instead of being given to established and young women political entrepreneurs.

This selection process has severe consequences for representation in the Parliament. Data by Free and Fair Elections Network (FAFEN) states that in 2018, 57% of the total women parliamentarians on reserved seats come from 6 major cities, with 14 out of the 60 MNAs hailing from Lahore<sup>2</sup>. FAFEN also states that 105 out of the 136 eligible districts are unrepresented by women in the National Assembly due to just how concentrated these nominations are in major cities. This data

corroborates what the testimonies talk about too: there is a severe lack of equitable representation for women across Pakistan, and the reserved seat system does not have a framework comprehensive enough to combat it.

There is more nuance to the conversation, however. One of the bigger criticisms of the system I found from the interviews conducted is that it brings people who are not capable of lawmaking to the parliament. As already discussed, the nomination mechanism favours proximity to power in the party and does not rely entirely on merit. However, despite a lack of equitable distribution, women in the National Assembly show a markedly better performance than men. FAFEN’s 2018 dataset states that women have a higher attendance record (66% as compared to 53% by men) and

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*Other testimonies from political entrepreneurs also suggest that a lot of nominations are provided to family members of already existing parliamentarians instead of being given to established and young women political entrepreneurs.*  
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double the amount of average participation (18 agenda items to order of the day vs. 9 by men). Their contribution is not strictly about women’s specific issues either. Women parliamentarians talk about important issues like inflation, national security and issues in the energy sector.

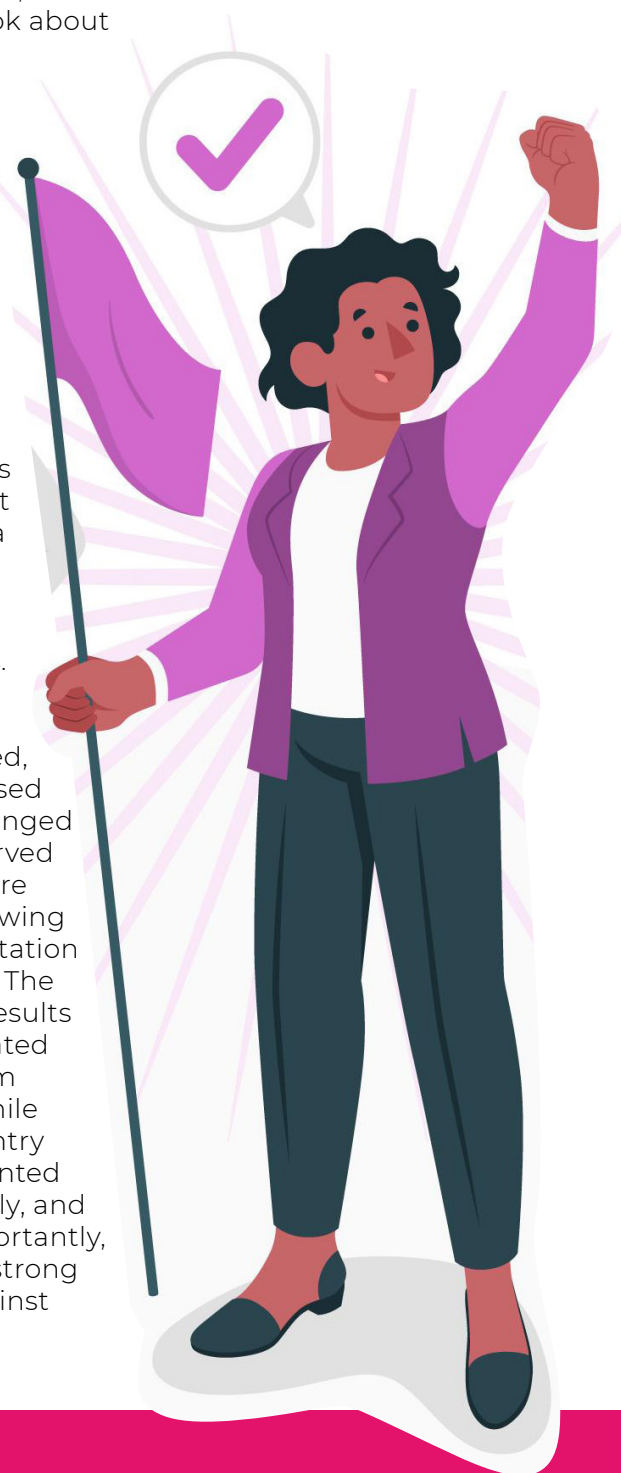
Despite this effort, however, the parliament echoes the dismissiveness that these women face in colloquial conversations about politics. More than 2/3rds of all women’s contributions to the agenda were either tabled or deferred to the final session of Parliament. Similarly, men were preferred when choosing participants in activities at the Parliament, with the

Questions Session being the only one with women being recognized higher on average than men.

I got to talk about this dismissiveness towards women parliamentarians with Dr. Ameena Zia, who is working on a book about reserved seats for women: "Women have always had to work harder to be acknowledged at the same level that men are for the bare minimum, it is no different in the Parliament." For Dr. Zia, this issue goes beyond procedural dealings at the parliament; it is symptomatic of a society committed to minimising representation for women in all forms.

To conclude, the testimonies received, and the data analysed suggests a two-pronged issue with the reserved seats. Firstly, they are not effective in allowing equitable representation across the country. The selection process results in highly concentrated representation from the major cities, while the rest of the country remains unrepresented by women. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, there is still a very strong dismissiveness against

women in politics which goes all the way from the grassroots to the elite. The reserved seats were created so women can benefit from the system and then eventually move towards competing in



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general elections. If the parliament remains similarly dismissive and does not work towards changing the general perception of the system, it is unlikely that Pakistan's democratic process would ever come out of this representative limbo it has thrown itself into.

**Mohammad Owais Sabri is a Political Science graduate from LUMS, with a special interest in Political Economy and Industrial Relations.**

1. <https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FAFEN-WOMEN-Parliamentarians-Performance-Report-2018-19.pdf>
2. *ibid*

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