

Pakistani Fights for Women; Traditional Views Vie with 21st Century

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LAHORE, Pakistan - Humaira Shahid spent her first four years in Pakistan's National Assembly trying desperately to build support for a bill to outlaw a corrupt lending practice in which families - unable to keep up interest payments in excess of 100 percent - can be forced to hand over a daughter to settle their accounts.

"These women were used as collateral, to barter, and it turned into a mafia business overnight," said Mrs. Shahid, astounded that colleagues did not share her outrage.

"I said, 'You can outlaw usury and save these women, and it doesn't cost anything, not even politically.' But there was resistance."

Mrs. Shahid finally got her law passed in May, but she is an unusually powerful senator: Her husband's family owns a chain of newspapers, which she could use as both a soapbox and research department.

She is running for re-election today and is so sure of success that she is barely campaigning.

But the writer, newspaper editor and mother of three feels mainly contempt for most of the five dozen women who, like her, were elected to parliament five years ago in seats reserved for women.

"Most of them were the wives or daughters of party men, and even the most effective were, so to say, constituency-oriented," she said. "Or they were obsequious, always voting yes. And a lot of them took a lot of trips, cut a lot of ribbons. They were corrupt."

Today is election day in Pakistan, a tumultuous nation of 164 million people balanced between feudal or tribal traditions and the demands and expectations of the 21st century.

It is a country that elected Benazir Bhutto - the first female prime minister to

serve in a Muslim country - but one in which local courts still recognize a Shariah-based law that makes it easier to prosecute the victim of a rape than the perpetrator.

It is also a nation in which just 10 percent of women work in formal jobs, and only 38 percent can read, according to U.N. agencies.

In recent months, President Pervez Musharraf has fired Supreme Court justices, closed news outlets and jailed lawyers and opposition leaders during a seven-week state of emergency that appeared to have more to do with his political survival than any threat to the nation.

But even his political rivals acknowledge that women have made significant advances during his rule.

In 2002, he forced reluctant lawmakers to ratify a law that set aside nearly one-third of the seats in parliament and local governments for women and minorities.

He also struck down a law that requires a rape victim to produce male witnesses, and earmarked substantial subsidies for girls' primary education. However, other important labor and sexual harassment rules remain far from enactment.

Women 'went crazy'

Nilofar Bakhtiar, a former Pakistani lawmaker and a minister of women's affairs under Mr. Musharraf, is deeply critical of her old boss but proud of his record on women's rights.

She remembers, in particular, a press conference at which Mr. Musharraf - who until December served simultaneously as president and head of the army - unexpectedly said that "karokari," or honor killings, are murders and should be prosecuted as such. Women's advocates and TV commentators "went crazy," she said.

"A lot of people hated that uniform," Mrs. Bakhtiar said with a sly smile. "But I took advantage of it [to advance women's interests]. He had the power that Benazir never had, and in many ways, he used it well."

But not always.

Mrs. Bakhtiar accompanied the president to the 2006 U.N. General Assembly opening, where he made a dismissive remark about the case of feminist heroine Mukhtar Mai, who was gang-raped on the orders of her village council to atone for her brother's crimes.

"I was walking behind him in the hotel, and reporters all came rushing over to me to ask about what he had just said," Mrs. Bakhtiar recalled. "I was horrified. I didn't know what to say."

The reservation of parliamentary seats for women is an experiment that has produced mixed results at best, but human rights advocates say it was an enormous step toward a more inclusive and representative government.

"It has not worked out as well as one would have hoped," said I.A. Rehman, director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an organization that is so independent that its Web site is frequently blocked by the government.

"They were inexperienced, and many were underqualified, they did not make their voices heard. But I hope the next assembly will be better," he said.

Indeed, most of the women put forward in 2002 were selected for their family connections to powerful men in the main political parties. Others were politically active advocates who didn't care about broad issues unrelated to their favored causes. Still others were technocrats with no political background.

Inequality addressed

The experience has also shown that women are not always the best advocates for women's rights, especially if they are unskilled in consensus building or distracted by other issues.

Mrs. Bhutto "didn't do that much for women, let's be honest," said Mrs. Bakhtiar, expressing an opinion that is widely shared among Pakistanis. "Benazir was groomed to be leader by her father, but the women today have a much harder time filling her shoes."

More than 120 women are contesting today's election, some of them seeking open seats, but most nominated by their parties to fill the national and provincial slots reserved for women.

The quota system for female lawmakers is just one of the ways that Pakistan has tried to address the long-term and debilitating inequality between the sexes.

The government has also changed the way it funds education to encourage girls' enrollment, and many provinces have stepped up benefits such as free books, lunches and uniforms to keep the nation's daughters in schools.

Female news reporters have become commonplace, covering or anchoring some of the biggest stories on Pakistan's 150 independent television channels.

Squads of female police officers - wearing distinctive pale blue headscarves and formed into their own units - can sometimes be seen working near their male colleagues.

Well-educated women have also begun to take their places in business, the arts, education and law, while younger women are plotting their own destinies.

A few years ago, amid much fanfare, a half-dozen female jet pilots made their air force debut.

"The pilots, the newscasters, that's very romantic, but they are tokens," sighed Mehnaz Aziz, an educational consultant who noted that Pakistani girls are often pulled out of school to help their parents earn money or care for younger siblings.

Women's advocates also worry that the majority of Pakistani women are simply not interested in politics. The number of registered female voters declined by nearly half in the past five years, according to a prominent election-monitoring organization, the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency.

Businesswomen rise

The Avari Hotel chain has laid on every amenity to attract a newly identified demographic - the female business traveler. Its hotel in Lahore has a separate check-in, a dedicated lounge area with tea and "lo-cal snacks" and a selection of scented bath products in selected rooms.

The Lady Avari promotion is so popular that the Karachi-based chain is installing it in every hotel it operates in Pakistan. But there are almost no women working in the Avari Lahore - not in the restaurants, nor housekeeping, nor even the ladies' lounge itself.

"We have women working here but not so many," acknowledged a hotel manager. "I don't think that is unusual. Many of them don't want to work outside their families."

And so it goes for the women of Pakistan: Most of their political, social and economic gains - and there have been plenty - are focused at the top, while the plight of the vast underclasses remains little improved.

Only 10 percent of Pakistani women hold formal jobs, according to the government's most recent filing with the U.N. Commission on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. But hundreds of thousands are engaged in agriculture, a sprawling industry where effective regulation is next to impossible and exploitation is often the norm.

The upper classes in Pakistan favor European fashions and, in the bigger cities, this season's designer fashions are readily available.

Mass-market jeans, sweaters and cocktail dresses are widely available, with popular brands sold alongside Pakistani knockoffs and the wildly patterned or embellished fabrics that appeal to local tastes.

But the majority of Pakistani women still prefer the classic shalwar khamis, the flowing three-piece ensemble that is cool in the unbearable summer months.

The baggy pants are largely hidden beneath the knee-length tunic, or kurta, which is tailored to be shapelessly modest or fitted and flattering. Men often wear a similar, simpler outfit.

For women, the outfit is always topped with a versatile six-foot shawl that covers the hair, camouflages the torso or simply drapes behind the shoulders.

Most Pakistani women casually cover their hair, but in the cities especially, the scarf, or dupatta, seems to more of a fashion accessory than a religious or cultural necessity.

Dress is always a strong cultural indicator, and the fact that regional designers and fashionable clothing chains have chosen to work with the local style rather than against it shows a broad acceptance.

"I have jeans, but usually I wear the shalwar," said Kieran, a stylish young Islamabad resident, who did not provide her last name. "My friends dress the same way."

Another place where fashion has barely changed is at the alter, where brides dress - as brides will everywhere - with all the glitz and glamour their families can provide.

A traditional Pakistani wedding unfolds over three days or more, with the husband's and bride's families celebrating separately and then together.

Weddings are exhausting and expensive, involving several sets of clothes, various feasts and a dowry that often includes household appliances or livestock as well as cash.

Although "love matches" are increasingly common, arranged marriages are still the rule, especially among poorer families.

"This is a business proposition," said Sadia Shakeel, project coordinator for Children's Resource International in Karachi, who noted that families often start

saving for a daughter's dowry soon after she is born.

Wouldn't that money be better spent on education?

"Not really," she said. "Women can't count on finding jobs here, and you can't have children with your work."

Financial burden

Sadia Zorah, a soft-spoken 28-year-old, spent the days before her wedding feast with female relatives who meticulously plucked, waxed, dyed, hennaed, costumed and adorned her with sparkling bridal accessories of plastic and paste.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, she looked more shell-shocked than joyous as she posed for ritual photos with well-wishers. The groom, a shop clerk, had not yet arrived, but many of his relatives were circling the third-floor banquet hall, making sure everything was in place for his arrival.

Both families had a lot riding on the match: In Pakistan, a wedding means the bride's parents and brothers have one less girl to care for, while the groom's parents have acquired a likely nursemaid for their later years.

As in many developing countries, there seems to be no bottom rung for the desperately poor in Pakistan to catch hold of. About 40 percent of the country live below the poverty line, according to the U.N. Development Program.

Traditionally, much of that financial burden falls upon the wives and mothers, who must take on informal labors to provide for their families.

With little education, the work that an illiterate girl or woman is likely to pick up work can be backbreaking or spirit-crushing - needlework, agriculture, peddling, trash picking or prostitution, all for painfully meager earnings.

And as inflation has driven up the price of household basics such as sugar and flour, the economic pressures are mounting.

"If the government wants to help women, they must bring down the prices because it is getting too expensive to live," said Yasmeen Khan, who is raising three children in the near-slums of Karachi and trying desperately to keep them in school and out of the unskilled labor market.

Mrs. Bakhtiar, for one, has no intention of returning to government regardless of which parties or politicians prevail in today's election.

She thinks she can be more effective working outside the government, and has

founded a private organization to work at the provincial level to build tolerance between men and women of various religious groups.

"What we really need is a free and fair election, but we aren't going to have that," she said last month. "People have no faith in the government, and no faith in the courts. It is time for the people to demand the changes that they want."