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## Women's movement in Pakistan: State, Class, Gender

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### Introduction

Women in Pakistan like their counterparts elsewhere in the world have been victims of the double oppression of class and gender. Given a socio-economic milieu in which the vast majority of the populace are victims of social, political and economic deprivation, women have had to struggle to win concessions from society and have had a difficult time maintaining themselves and their families.

The situation in Pakistan requires a discussion of women because the regime ideologically relies on Islamic fundamentalism including its anti-female tenets. In developing and disseminating this ideology the military regime has had to rely on the most conservative of Pakistani political formations ; i.e., the ultra-right wing of the Jamiat-e-Islami. Fundamentalist religious groups in Pakistan, while ambivalent on some issues such as the relationship of labor and capital, agrarian taxation, and property are in total agreement when it comes to women ; they are inferior to men, and their proper place is in the home serving the male.

The second reason for writing on women is that a fascist state is being institutionalized based on grass-roots organizations and support from the lower middle class. Indicators of this are the establishment of **zakaat** and **salaat** committees, patronage systems, and tighter control of educational institutions. The committees have been formed to distribute taxes on wealth, and to report citizens who fail to abide by state regulations. Support from urban lower class people is garnered by awarding titles and privileges to them. In education, liberal professors have been removed from their positions as in the case of Punjab University and **madrasas**, religious centers of learning, are being encouraged. These generate a traditionally oriented intelligentsia supportive of the state and the political right. Fascism has been no respecter of women and in Pakistan the development of fascist tendencies combined with strong religious support portends and ominous future for women.

A third reason for considering women's issues is that for the first time women are organizing a nation-wide movement to fight for the preservation and extension of rights currently under attack. Since 1981 women have constituted the vanguard of the political movement in Pakistan and therefore need to be taken seriously. Women's struggle in the Pakistani context means a struggle for democratization of society and for its secularization. As such, the women's movement is critically important in its opposition to the present military regime.

This article examines, first, the nature of the Pakistani state, its transformation and linkage with religious fundamentalist ideology, and the measures taken against women by Zia-ul-Huq's military regime. The second section traces the historical evolution of the women's movement, situates the discussion within the Pakistani class formation, and notes the class representation within the women's movement itself. Third, the women's movement is critiqued in terms of its strengths and weaknesses and finally, future courses of action are considered.

### The state in Pakistan

#### Historical Trajectory and Transformation of the State

One cannot isolate the military's record on women from its relationship to the state and fundamentalist religious ideology. In order to understand the significance of the measures directed against women by the current regime, the development and transformation of the Pakistani state must be analyzed, especially its sources of support and its ideological base. The events bringing the current regime to power are well known. In 1968 a popular uprising in both East and West was directed against national and class privileges. In the Western wing, much of the organizing work was undertaken by the left, but because it was so factionalized, the beneficiary of this movement was the populist government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto himself belonged to a particular class from which he never entirely divorced himself. His regime exhibited all the flaws and weaknesses of any social-democratic formation in the Third World. Having come to power through the support of large sectors of the popular classes, workers and peasants, Bhutto upon assuming control of the state apparatus, proceeded to realign his party, and brought into it many of the same persons and classes against whom his original supporters had struggled. This suggests that Bhutto's primary alliance was with the landed classes which came to dominate the leadership in his party. Moreover, it suggests that Bhutto made this alliance aware that popular movements in Pakistan were urban based, and assumed that as long as he could control large sectors of the urban population, he could continue to rule. This meant that the industrial bourgeoisie did not regain its hegemony during his period, and that large segments of the urban middle class were pacified through the creation of massive public works programs and state sponsored forms of employment.

These measures, however, were insufficient to counteract existing inherent contradictions in the basic nature of the state and society in Pakistan. Pakistan at its inception was a nation with a very weak bourgeoisie, which was highly dependent on the state for its development and advance. The state apparatus itself was in the hands of a fledgling petty bourgeoisie which increasingly dominated the bureaucracy. This petty bourgeoisie, immediately following partition, was in the process of transforming itself into a dominant class. Given a weak political infrastructure, the underdevelopment of the bourgeois class, and the completely mercenary nature of the country's ruling strata, power moved from the realm of political parties to the bureaucracy. An additional factor in internal class dynamics was the military, which perceived its future to be with the bureaucracy and hence became allied with it.

A serious error made by Bhutto was the attempt to transform the bureaucracy and the military. Having reconstituted his party, the Pakistan People's Party, to accommodate the landed classes, Bhutto proceeded to try and accommodate those segments of the disenfranchised petty bourgeoisie. This he attempted by changing the traditional method of recruitment into the civil services, and as a corollary, making the bureaucracy subservient to the party and by reorganizing the military through forced retirements, appointment of loyal officers to positions of power and other measures.

These attempts were inadequate for consolidating Bhutto's power and revealed once again the nature of class alliances in Pakistan. The only classes that would have stood by Bhutto were systematically made peripheral to the political process, i.e., the national minorities, workers and peasants. The latter two did have concessions made to them, but the former were brutally repressed. The right wing elements, which never had much public following in electoral politics in Pakistan, and who were much more cognizant of the increasing polarization in society were definitely the prime movers in the upsurge to unseat Bhutto. Other groups

were also active demanding democratic rights for national minorities and more radical reforms. Bourgeois political parties also opposed Bhutto's attempts at instituting the People's Party as the hegemonic party in the country. Thus a strange coalition of forces emerged in opposition to Bhutto : the industrialists, who had felt the brunt of his nationalization policies, political forces of the center and right which felt disenfranchised and the military and bureaucracy who saw their privileges being taken away.

It was in this context that the military stepped in, ostensibly to restore democracy. Having come to power, however, they immediately lost the support of the more radical elements that had participated in the movement. The bourgeois political parties continued to bask in the vain dream of a return to power, but they were soon disillusioned, and rapidly attempted some accommodation with or came to oppose the regime. The industrialists, too, had not recovered their confidence in the capacity of the state to curb the popular classes so, many of them continued to withhold their support, often choosing to invest overseas. The group that had nothing to lose and everything to gain from an alliance with the military were the right-wing fundamentalist elements. Immediately following the coup they realised that this was their only chance to implement their agenda and therefore they cooperated with the military.

What occurred following the 1977 coup, therefore, was a return to power of the military-bureaucratic apparatus. This time, however, there was a difference. In previous periods there had been a modernist flavor to the state which was a consequence of the liberal training and tradition to which many individuals within the ruling strata belonged. An irony of the original Pakistan movement was that the demand for a nation of Muslims came from its modernist elements not from the traditional petty bourgeoisie. In 1977, however, a shift occurred. Many of the prominent military figures involved in the 1977 coup were not Sandhurst trained, they were trained in the United States. Nor was their background the same as that of people like Ayub Khan, they belonged to the more traditional sectors of their class. Similarly, in the bureaucracy, right wing elements had engaged in a conscious and concerted policy of infiltration. Thus, the two state institutions which dominate the state apparatus became increasingly right wing and traditionalist.

An additional factor that must also be taken into account is the basic antagonism between secularism (exemplified by liberal bourgeois democratic ideology) and forms of class, minority, and gender exploitation. I would argue that in newly emergent countries like Pakistan, secularism and democracy necessarily lead to a radical transformation of society particularly at the level of social relations. Given the degree of polarization that exists, however, both phenomena are recognized by the ruling strata as being totally inimical to their interests. Secular and constitutional rule are too uncertain as methods of control of the populace and should be avoided rather than encouraged.

What does this analysis imply for the state as it exists in Pakistan today? I would argue that the collaboration between the fundamentalist religious forces and the military, though still in place, is now no longer central. Instead what is emerging is a fascist state in which middle class elements are being involved in close collaboration and participation.

When this internal dynamic is coupled with the international configuration, within which Pakistan is located, the situation becomes even more alarming. Economically, the regime is heavily dependent on external sources of support for its survival. No country that claims its major source of foreign exchange earnings to be remittances from labor employed overseas (as does Pakistan) is on very strong economic grounds. This economic support has been forthcoming, but under conditions which signify ill for the bulk of Pakistani masses.

Ideological explanations are never quite enough, however, and economic necessity does not guarantee any regime international assistance. We need to look at other levels of explanation that also have a bearing on the Pakistani state. Politically, the

configuration in what is known as Near Asia has changed radically in the past few years. The emergence of Khomeini's regime in Iran and the revolution in Afghanistan have meant that two countries have been lost to U.S. hegemony.(1) The changes in Afghanistan and Iran have in turn dramatically altered Pakistan's position so that it (instead of Iran) now serves as the new gendarme in the region. Given the mercenary character of Pakistani armed forces, their strength and numbers, it is particularly suited to this task. Its agreement to fulfill this role means its continued survival. The U.S., has promised 3.5 billion dollars over a five year period as a reward. From the standpoint of the U.S. this assistance entails ignoring the worst types of repression of democratization and constitutional rule it means tacitly, if not overtly, supporting the emergence of right-wing fascism. Pakistan once again has bartered away its freedom to U.S. imperatives involving the continual oppression of its people and denying them civilian rule.

From the above discussion, it should be apparent that a conjuncture has been reached where the possibilities of a return to a liberal democratic state becomes increasingly limited. For a defeat of the Islamicist elements in Pakistani society and the overthrow of the military a protracted struggle will have to be waged. For this to be effectively launched it will have to be conducted by the most oppressed sectors of the population : national minorities, workers and women. As indicated by past experience, mainstream political parties are the only elements able to bring a return to secularism because its absence hurts them the most.(2)

This analysis is particularly important and relevant for both the women's movement, as for other classes with democratic aspirations. On the gender question, its implications are especially clear : Islamization in Pakistan today necessarily implies a tremendous set-back to women's rights. Struggle against it cannot be waged in the context of what Islam does or does not permit. Rather, it must be recognized that an advance on this question requires a direct attack on the very discourse itself, on the legitimacy of those who seek to impose it, and underlines the need for a restoration of secular institutions which would serve to restore and advance women's rights, and those of other oppressed classes in our society.

### Women's Oppression Today : the Military's Record

Based on the previous section it can be seen that even though the regime is no longer dependent on fundamentalist groups for its survival their support continues to be significant. This can be clearly seen in the referendum that was held on December 19, 1983, where fractions of the Jamiat constituted the only political group in the country that encouraged people to vote. The relationship between the religious right and the military is not a contradictory one in that they continue to push for the same goals, i.e., a capitalist economic sector and a repressive political system where economic inequalities are maintained even though individual beneficiaries may change.

It is in the realm of the political that deep rooted changes have occurred. "Democracy" is now no longer possible for the Pakistani masses. What we are promised instead is a form of "divine rule" with Zia as leader, sharing power with candidates carefully screened by the military, and elected by voters equally screened. These are extremely significant changes in that Islamic symbols are being used to justify a repressive and brutal political system.

It is at the political level that the regime has and will continue to have support of the **mullahs** (religious leaders). If any tension exists between them it is because the mullahs view the regime as not moving far and fast enough. It is this rapprochement of the military and mullahs that bodes ill for women. Since the regime must throw crumbs to the mullahs to maintain their support, the most vulnerable group are women. Consequently, aside from the suppression of democratic rights of the population as a whole,

women have been subject to virulent attack.

This attack has been both ideological and concrete. The ideological attack was carefully orchestrated with the help of the mullahs. The last few years have seen the emergence of mullahs in mosques and in the state-controlled media proselytizing against women and proclaiming the wonders of the Iranian model with regard to its position on women. This position is exemplified most clearly by the "veil and four walls" controversy generated by Israr Ahmed and others. What Israr and his cohorts have tried to put across is the notion that a woman's place is in the home ; that she is not capable of the same thought and rationality as men and is designed for housework and to be an object of pleasure for her spouse and entirely dependent upon him. In popularizing this notion, sermons were given by Israr and supplemented by state television.

This campaign has seemingly been successful particularly among many middle class Pakistani males who view the emancipation of their women as a threat to their property and control. The fact that the state is permitting such statements to be made and is employing these individuals means a reinforcement for the sentiments of many men who have never accepted the notion of women being equal or deserving independence. That this is the case is indicated by an instance in the fall of 1983 when local landlords in Nawabpur paraded three nude women through the town-square. Such a public display of brutalizing and victimizing women is new. Equally important, cases of rape have gone up radically during the same period.

Besides creating an ideology against women, the current regime has taken specific steps to diminish women's rights. Indeed, ever since its proclaimed intent to institute a religious state (Nizam-e-Mustafa) women have been one of the key groups targeted for acts against them. In November 1983, Zia signed a "Law of Evidence" Ordinance whereby the status of woman is reduced to half that of a man in terms of her ability to bear witness in court. This law also makes her testimony inadmissible in cases of rape. It also states that the murder of a woman does not warrant the same penalty as that of a man.

The degradation of women to the status of half a being is the culmination of a series of attacks on women. Prior to this, the government issued other proclamations banning the participation of women athletes in international and mixed sports events, attempted to repeal the 1961 Family Laws Ordinance and announced its intention to eliminate coeducation and institute separate universities for women. The purpose is to drive women out of the professions back into the home. The intent is to create a milieu which can appeal to the worst instincts in men giving them the right to thoroughly subjugate women. What the regime did not openly proclaim it tried to accomplish through its surrogates, the ultraconservative religious leaders. None of this has been taken by Pakistani women passively : they have responded with anger, vigor and initiative.

## Historical overview of women's movement in Pakistan

### Beginnings and Evolution : 1940-1977

Any discussion of the historical development of a particular social movement must address the class structure of that movement. The origins of the women's in Pakistan can be traced back to the pre-independence period when bourgeois women constituted a vocal element in the anti-colonial struggle as well as in the Pakistan movement.(3) Their involvement led to a recognition of their contribution by Jinnah who made a strong plea for the removal of constraints against women. As early as 1944 he stated that : "No nation can rise to glory unless your women are side by side with you. We are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the house as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live. You

should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life.(4)

Viewing the independent state of Pakistan as essentially a secular state, Jinnah asserted that women had claims to the same rights as did minorities, nationalities or other oppressed groups within the framework of a bourgeois democratic state. Even at this early stage the mullahs opposed the rights of women and were also vehemently opposed to the creation of Pakistan justified on the grounds that the Muslims of India had the rights to a separate homeland. Voicing their total opposition to the creation of Pakistan, they called Jinnah "kafir" or unbeliever because of his support for a secular state.(5)

Following the creation of Pakistan, women recognized some of their demands through the legal code. Women attained voting rights, and the Family Laws Ordinance was passed in 1961. Under this law, women were officially able to inherit agricultural property (in consonance with Islamic law), second marriages were made contingent upon agreement by the first wife, divorce was made more difficult for the male, women attained the right to initiate divorce for the first time, and a system of registration of marriages was also introduced.

By virtue of the family law coming into effect the rights of educated politically aware women were safe-guarded. However, this law did not penetrate very far. Working class women in the urban areas were only marginally able to benefit from it. The condition of rural women isolated as they were from the political scene and from the center of organizational activity, continued pretty much as before.

A few women's organizations existed at this time. They can be roughly divided into two categories : charitable women's organizations and organizations run by progressive women. The most well known among the former category was the All Pakistan-Women's Association (APWA), among the latter Anjuman-e-Jamhooriyat Pasand Khawateen. Although there existed a basic difference among the two in that APWA was an association of upper-class women providing services for women from less well-off socio-economic strata, whereas the Anjuman contained as its members women from more diverse class backgrounds, the latter was never really able to take off. My sense is that one of the contributing reasons for the failure of the Anjuman was that it failed to consciously separate women's issues from those of peace, social inequality, etc..Being closely linked in its leadership to the pro-Moscow Communist Party, they failed to develop an independent position on women. The dominant pattern of work among publicly known women's organizations came to be social work-charitable organizations. By and large, these groups reflected their class position : altruism combined with reforms, reforms imposed from the top, changing the system to make it bearable but without fundamentally transforming reality or even directly confronting the inequities extant in it.

During the regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the 1973 Constitution granted women rights including education to all rural and urban women. This was also the period that saw the mushrooming of leftwing political parties and a variety of women's groups in the professions, trade unions, and student's groups. Women did not feel threatened by Bhutto hence they chose to exploit the favorable environment to push for an extension of women's rights within the framework of the state.

An exception was the role played by women in the 1977 campaign against Bhutto. Bourgeois women led this movement, not protesting the abrogation of democratic rights by the regime (a criticism which many left groups and the national minorities levied against him), but mounting a right-wing opposition to his economic policies and the inflationary impact on their dwindling incomes.

In 1980 women emerged again on the political scene. This time, however, the organizations that moved to the forefront are qualitatively different in their emphasis, activities and approach. This change partially reflects the nature of the transformation of women's status and socio-economic involvement in the society

and to the transformation of the Pakistani state.

### Transformation of the Women's Movement

The transformation in the women's movement is directly connected with political processes in the country, as well as the transformation of the class structure. What this means is that two parallel developments have occurred. First given economic trends in the country a middle class developed which has become dependent on women entering the work force. This was particularly critical in the urban areas, where traditionally middle class families had been loath to see their women step outside the house. Second, the increasing hold of the left which drew great numbers of men and women into the political process, led to the spontaneous mass movement that came into being towards the close of Ayub Khan's rule. Both these trends meant that women engaged in political processes in which they had not previously participated.

The late sixties and early seventies saw a blossoming of intellectual thought and grass-roots political organization, albeit in embryonic form. Women in large numbers joined the professions and though their numbers were relatively small they made significant progress. Television in particular broke the taboos generally connected in Pakistani society with music and the arts. College going women with artistic talents took advantage of this opportunity and became instrumental in portraying a different woman.

The mushrooming of left-wing political parties mainly Maoist in character, tied as they were of the working class and the peasantry, drew into the political arena women who were previously totally dissociated from this process. Not only did this serve to politicize more women than ever before, but it also gave them badly needed organisational experience. The first move against women and the political parties came shortly after Zia came to power. Attacks were mounted against two groups, bourgeois political parties, and the oppressed : workers, peasants and women. Women were faced with a two-pronged attack which threatened their active participation in civic society. This attack was partly ideological, an atmosphere of hate being created against them through state and religious proclamations ; and second, a threat to their economic involvement in the work force. In response women realized that it was imperative that they organize and challenge the regime.

### New Organizational Formations

September 1981 saw the birth of the Women's Action Forum (WAF), a mass-based popular front of many women's organizations and concerned individuals. The catalyst of WAF was a **Zina** case, where a fifteen year old woman was sentenced to flogging because of marrying a man of a lower class background contrary to her parent's wishes. This sentence triggered a response among women. Action was necessary as this case followed various other attacks on women including professors being molested, women being tortured for their political beliefs and affiliations, restrictions instituted against their professional activities and the imposition of a dress code for female public employees. It was also recognized that help could not be expected from other quarters, either from the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) or the left since these groups were fighting for their survival, and had not taken an active part in fighting for women's rights in earlier periods. Women recognized that this was a fight they must lead themselves, that the need was to educate each other and fight for their rights to overcome previous inequalities.

Created initially by professional, middle class women, WAF received the endorsement of seven women's groups. These groups, while maintaining their independent existence, decided to rally under WAF's banner in a popular front dedicated to one common goal : the achievement of basic human rights for all Pakistani women. These rights include education, employment,

physical security, choice of marital status, planned parenthood and non-discrimination.

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

Realizing that the state was likely to concede only token demands to them if they limited their activities to submitting petitions, WAF decided to broaden its base. Towards this end, in January 1982, the Karachi chapter of WAF organized a two day symposium on "Human Rights and Pakistani Women" while simultaneously running workshops on education, law, consciousness-raising and health. This was merely the first of a series of symposia and workshops held on a wide variety of topics of interest to women in English and Urdu as well as some of the regional languages.

WAF also began to reach out to minorities as well as to working class women. Their panels and workshops reflected their seriousness and included such topics as inflation, crimes against women, consumer consciousness, and the nationality question. More recently there has been considerable discussion in the organization regarding organizing, particularly in areas where working class women are concentrated.

While striving to deepen its base, WAF was at the same time extending it. October 1981 saw the creation of its second chapter in Lahore, the capital of the Punjab province. This was soon succeeded, by one in Islamabad, and more modest beginnings in Peshawar, Bahawalpur, Lyallpur, and Quetta. It was made clear that anybody who so wished could initiate a WAF chapter, provided that they were willing to adopt the charter drawn up by the Karachi chapter. The activities of each new chapter is subject to scrutiny by the two oldest chapters, i.e., Karachi and Lahore. If any discrepancy is noted between the activities of the local chapter and WAF's charter, the delinquent chapter is subject to expulsion.

WAF's chapters are also encouraged to incorporate as many women's organizations as possible in each area in order to expand the organization, facilitate coordination, avoid duplication of effort, and facilitate coalition building. WAF considers the gender question central in the formation of a united front for women. Their position is that women need to form a **mass** organization to fight for their rights. In their attempts to realize this goal, WAF constitutes a dynamic force. Its activities are constantly expanding, its membership growing, and the base expanding at an accelerated pace. By virtue of this dynamism WAF has shown that women **are** indeed a powerful force in the Pakistani political scene.

WAF is also attempting to structure the organization in such a way that it remains democratically open. Each chapter is free to determine what its organizational structure should be. Within the organization representation and consent of members is given importance, as is work contribution, rather than official status. A working committee handles organizational matters connected with different chapters, and each chapter has a representative whenever all the chapters meet. In terms of its structure, membership and program, WAF represents a radical departure from previous women's groups.

WAF has served as a catalyst for other groups to become active on women's issues particularly groups connected with bourgeois political parties, e.g., the Tehrik-e-Istiklal, as well as women's groups with leftwing sympathies, e.g., the Tehrik-e-Niswan, and Tehrik-e-Khawateen.

Shortly after WAF emerged, its successes became apparent to all observers of the political scene. Bourgeois and middle class women were flocking to WAF's meetings, alarmed at the turn of events since the military take-over. Among WAF's membership

were women with strong connections to bourgeois political parties, particularly the Tehrik-e-Istiklal, the protege of Asghar Khan, a retired armed forces officer. It is commonly felt by women within WAF that once bourgeois parties realized the political value of women's mobilization, they wished to capture the movement and utilize it for their own political advancement. WAF members with long-standing political experience recognized the danger of having women's issues again made subservient to a broader political agenda, or appropriated in a fashion not necessarily relective of women's need or demands.

Within the Lahore chapter where elements from the bourgeois political elements were most heavily represented, and the most politically developed membership existed, this resulted in conflict within the organization. The net result was that elements connected with bourgeois political parties split off from the main organization and created a separate chapter which they call WAF (democratic) as opposed to the original group which is called WAF (national). The lack of success of the splinter group is evident from the fact that they have not had much success in mobilizing more than a handful of women. This is not to suggest that the women involved in WAF (democratic) are not seriously committed to women's issues, but for many of them the issue is subservient to the dictates of their political party affiliations, or it is a part-time involvement. The possibilities for any serious advancement by this group appears to be extremely limited.

In contrast, other women's groups that have emerged or become more active since the creation of WAF constitute a left-wing alternative and are the Tehrik-e-Khawateen in Lahore. Each group places the women's question within the overall framework of the class question, and in consequence primarily focus on those sectors with whom the left has traditionally worked, i.e., working women, the peasantry, and students. They have shown varying degrees of success in mobilizing these sectors of the population. Around some events they have also shown a willingness to cooperate with WAF. Particularly in the case of Tehrik-e-Khawateen, they have had a positive effect in organizing rural women and in pulling WAF further to the left. The interaction of these groups with WAF has been principled in that they have not attempted to take over the organisation. They continue to carry on their own activities, and whenever specific events warrant, cooperate with WAF to maximize the impact of their work and prevent a further deterioration in women's situation. Unlike the bourgeois groups which split off from WAF, these latter groups are engaged in independent work.

### **Class Structure Within the Women's Movement : Shifts and implications.**

In the early years of Pakistan few women were gainfully employed in the formal sector. This picture has been radically transformed largely as the consequence of a modernist developmental policy prior to the current regime where women entered schools and colleges and learned skilled trades. The extension of education and skills means that large numbers of middle class women are now gainfully employed. This has not necessarily resulted in an improvement of their position within the household, where they are still expected to perform domestic labor (unless they are privileged enough to hire others to take over this task). For the educated, skilled woman worker, however, it has meant a certain degree of heightened awareness. It is from this sector that the leadership of the women's movement comes, and it is also the sector from which most WAF recruits are coming.

There is, however, the informal sector of the economy in which women are also employed in large numbers such as domestics. Traditionally, there has been a fair degree of independence among these women from their menfolk, partly in consequence of the depressed conditions of their families. Like the Blacks in the United States, many of the males in these families have had to leave the household for extended periods to seek employment elsewhere. The women are left behind to manage and in the

process learn and acquire a certain degree of militance and consciousness regarding their own situations, which is impossible to entirely eliminate upon the return of male family members.

There is a third category of women emerging, i.e., the wives of laborers who have gone to work in the Middle East. Like the women discussed above, one would expect to see radical changes occur in the demeanor of these women. To date very little work has been done examining what the nature of these changes are. One cannot automatically assume that they will acquire the same consciousness as their counterparts discussed above. This is partially mitigated by the material well-being of these families. Rural women vary dramatically from their urban counterparts. Even within this category, however, there is additional variation depending upon whether women come from settled agricultural areas or are located in the tribal economy. Further differentiation occurs depending upon their relation to property.

Rural women in settled agricultural settings have traditionally enjoyed greater mobility than their urban counterparts. This is primarily the consequence of their active and prolonged participation in the labor force. It is also a function of the lack of support for fundamentalists in the countryside. Government statistics totally overlook women's labor force participation, since data gatherers have traditionally relied on males to collect material, in terms of critical decisions of marriage, divorce and education, however, women remain the victims of male prejudice and control. Within the rural economy as in the urban, middle class women have been socially the most repressed. Affluence to a middle class rural family is often displayed by putting their womenfolk behind the "veil". In adhering to this custom, upwardly mobile families are merely duplicating the feudal forms still observable in Pakistani society whereby women of landed families were kept cloistered. Changes are occurring in all three categories and all are part and parcel of radical rural transformation that has been occurring since the late fifties.

Agrarian transformation has meant a steadily deteriorating life style for the vast majority of rural and urban dwellers including an increased dependence on the market. This in turn has meant an increased workload for women in the rural sector. With the introduction of new crops, women are productively employed in sectors which were previously unavailable to them. Agrarian change has also meant that certain types of jobs previously available to women are being eliminated because of the penetration of urban markets into the countryside. This contradictory dynamic has meant that women's lives have become harder. They have had to adjust to changes in productive employment, and often have had to bear the brunt of having households torn asunder because of migration by one or more household members to the city.

At the level of social relations, urban influences can be clearly seen in the villages. These are reflected not just in superficial changes, e.g. clothing, but also in attitudes towards education or travel by women. Traditional religious influences of Islamic orthodoxy mean very little to the vast bulk of the rural peasant populace. While spending time in rural areas of Pakistan, one is struck by the fact that, particularly among the landless, most families try to educate their women if facilities are readily available. Taboos still exist prohibiting women from going away to school and economic realities make this an impossibility even when the will exists.

There exists in today's Pakistan then one general trend that unites the urban and rural areas. This is the overall deterioration in the economic well-being of large segments of its population. This is expressed by a concentration of economic resources in the rural areas and inflationary influences in the cities. Both these trends mean that women have to work for wages and their menfolk, whether they like it or not, have to acknowledge the necessity of female participation in the labor force. The latter does not of course mean that these same individuals accept this as necessarily leading to the emancipation of women. On the contrary, it is precisely among segments of the population hardest hit by

economic recession that Islamic ideology serves as a useful tool. As in the development of any fascist state elements of these classes especially in the urban areas prove the most likely recruits. It remains up to forces opposed to the development of fascist ideology, which in Pakistan's case fundamentalist Islamic Ideology serves to reinforce, to work to prevent that. And the women's movement has shown itself capable of taking on that challenge. Obviously, it still has a long way to go.

It is no coincidence that the women's movement has gone through an enormous transformation in the class basis of its members. This is certainly true of groups such as Tehrik-e-Khawateen, but it also applies to the Women's Action Forum. The shift in the class composition of the women's movement has important implications for the direction it takes. It means that altruism is no longer on the agenda and issues of equality, secularism and democratic rights hold the center stage. There are various limitations that do still exist in the movement. For example, there is constant conflict among members representing different class interest and continued debates about direction and tactics. Often these debates tend to be resolved in ways looked askance at by women who belong to left parties, but the debates have the potential of moving the movement further to the left.

There is an attempt by the regime and its proponents in the media to portray the movement as the creation of a handful of western-educated women having no roots in their own culture. This charge has failed to take hold in popular perception both because the women's movement today is deeply embedded in our own reality, and also because most people view women as being actively engaged in struggle against the forces of repression. Whether this perception continues will depend on how fast and how deeply the movement is able to incorporate women of the most repressed economic classes and become what it purports to strive for - a mass movement.

### **The women's movement in its current phase: achievements and limitations**

What does all this amount to? What has this reconstituted women's movement, spearheaded by WAF, accomplished and where is it headed? There is no simple answer to this: the accomplishments must be seen in terms of both the short-run and the long-term; similarly, the limitations.

In its battle with the regime, the women's movement superficially appears to have lost more often than it has won. Two hundred women demonstrated in Lahore in February 1983 against the proposed changes in the Law of Evidence. At least twenty of the participants were injured in their clash with the police, and another thirty arrested. Despite this demonstration and support women got from men, the proposed changes were nevertheless rammed through the assembly less than a month later. Since then women were able to pressure Zia from signing the law into effect. In the winter of 1984, however, the Law of Evidence was finally put into effect.

Similarly in their attempts to prevent floggings of women, as well as to pressure the regime to send women athletes to international sports events, they were unsuccessful. The move to institute separate universities for women and the dismantling of the Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 have both been temporarily shelved, but indications are that the regime is to reopen these matters and in a form opposed by WAF and other women's groups.

The movement has had two main victories in its confrontation with the regime: the first in the removal of Israr Ahmed from television, although he still continues to hold his post as a member of Zia's Consultative Council. The second is the case where women from a small rural town were publicly insulted and subjected to indignities at the hands of a local propertied family. In this case, the regime saw fit to prosecute the family. In both these instances there is a similarity: particular individuals are dispensable, but the overall policies and positions vis-a-vis

women remain unchanged.

From other vantage points the gains of women seem fairly substantial. One can examine these in terms of the specific organizations concerned, such as the WAF, as well as in terms of the maturation of the women's movement. Women have, for the first time, organized in a way that makes them an important force with which any political group in Pakistan will have to contend. They have broken out of the old pattern of paternalism and charitable work that characterized previous organizations. They have initiated a process of education, organization and informational work that will leave a mark on women regardless of whether WAF survives or not.

WAF as the key expression of the women's movement has steadily been broadening and deepening its base of support. In doing so, they have been conscious that it is not sufficient to merely critique the regime on the grounds it sets, but to deal with issues that immediately touch the lives of average Pakistani women whose concerns are not with universities or women's involvement in sports. Towards this end WAF has initiated discussions on topics of more immediate concern; child labor, growing narcotics use, scarcity of public services, and crimes against women. They have initiated serious research on the status and condition of women in order to concretize their position and activities. They have continued to publicly demonstrate their opposition to the current regime. Towards this end they have blitzed the media with articles, comments, inquiries, and in so doing have recruited more and more women into their ranks, as well as gained increasing support among men. The latter reflects their ability to make the women's issue a central one, and their capacity to relate it to other progressive causes. They have paved the way towards non-sectarianism and shown that despite the current repressive environment, mass organizing is not only possible, but necessary.

Unlike the bourgeois political parties, they have not maintained a highly skewed organizational structure. Learning from their experiences with left groups they have recognized the need to proceed step by step and to keep pace with reality at all times. The task of organizing women is much more difficult than that of organizing either workers or peasants. In the former case one has to struggle against economic forces as well as the social taboos against changing many elements that directly affect women's lives. The desire of WAF to constitute a mass force can be seen as a consequence of the nature of the questions they are addressing and as a consequence of the lessons learned from the past where too often groups isolated themselves from the bulk of the population because of the rigid positions they took. Such rigidity often led to the degeneration of differences to personal squabbles, factionalization and stagnation.

We have earlier alluded to the open nature of the women's movement, drawing women from all classes. This phenomena has been an integral part of the movement, although there is not always agreement between the women who belong to the older women's groups, e.g., APWA (which have a strong upper class bias) and some WAF members who have either just entered the political scene, or have had previous experience with different left groups. Although thus far all these various groups have worked well together, it is possible that there may be a parting of the ways when and if more radical elements begin to push for changes that link class and gender, directly confront Islamic ideology, and seek means of struggle outside formal structures. Even though such a division may not be immediate its eventuality must be borne in mind.

Even within WAF different chapters are incredibly uneven in their membership and this unevenness is reflected in their work. WAF's Lahore chapter is by far the most politically advanced and more willing to take action than other chapters. In this they are assisted by the presence of Tehrik-e-Khawateen, which shares their militancy. This unevenness is being resolved as the activities of one chapter becomes an example to others. Karachi WAF recently organized its first demonstration and many of its members feel more confident now of engaging in similar actions in the future.

Since the organization is dynamic and growing, new recruits sometimes hinder progress. This means that the organization is always engaged in struggle of the more politically conscious members against those less so, the more militant members against those more trepiditous. This is a natural outcome of organizing a movement, since all women do not share the same experiences, needs, and/or interests, they have varying degrees of commitment. It is too soon to know which tendencies will win, but equally, it is too soon to start boycotting the movement because its most well-known organization has not gone far enough.

As stated earlier, WAF adopted a non-structured approach in its organization, membership, and parliamentary procedures within the organization. Both these factors have had their negative elements: consensual decision-making often prevents serious debate of the issues particularly when such a variety of opinions and class categories is represented. For WAF it has often meant waffling on whether or not to recognize Zia's regime as legitimate, whether to direct attacks against it or to appeal to it, whether to pose the question of women's oppression in Pakistan as being directly linked to Islamic ideology, or whether to try and reformulate Islamic discourse so as to appeal through it for the improvement of women's rights.

On the matter of centralization of authority within the organization, it is generally felt that this issue has been resolved by leaving it up to individual chapters to arrive at their own resolution of the matter. It is interesting to note that the chapter most often accused of this, i.e., the Lahore chapter continues to be the one most active, and most swift in its actions. It is also the first chapter that has suffered a split. The balance between democracy and centralism is a tricky one, and undoubtedly the scales tilt in one direction or another from time to time. Within the structure of WAF, however, one sees this as less likely to happen if open discussion is encouraged. The process of elections within the organization is also designed to prevent this from happening.

What unevenness and class heterogeneity suggests is that once the regime begins to take a more antagonistic stand towards WAF and the general women's movement, there is a possibility that the more uncertain elements within it will fall away. The extent of this falling away is impossible to predict, given that a large section of the women involved have had no previous political experience, and therefore have not been tested. There is no doubt, however, that some women will leave who have close ties to bureaucratic elements and more stake in the system.

Its urban character also means that WAF and the women's movement have not been able to reach rural women. This is a shortcoming that will be rectified as more women enter the movement and a deliberate attempt is made to spread into the countryside. Given the linkages between urban workers and their rural counterparts, it is expected that as working class women become more and more integrated into the movement this link will be strengthened.

Inherent in the women's movement, as in other progressive formations previously existing in Pakistan, is a tendency towards tailism, i.e., allowing the direction of struggle to be determined by the state. By letting the regime set the agenda, women will be permitting the forward motion of their activities to be determined by the state and not by their own definition. The women's movement too could become entrapped by this tendency. The more advanced elements in the movement seem to be cognizant of this possibility, but the newer recruits are so tied into day to day reactions to the military's policies that the wider issues and needs can easily be lost sight of. By letting the regime set the agenda, women will be permitting the forward motion to be determined on the terms of the state and not on their own definition of what needs to be done. There is a critical need, therefore, while responding to the attacks on women not to let this absorb all their energy. It also needs to be kept in mind that legal rights really mean very little to most Pakistani women. Transforming that reality necessitates educational and informational work rooted in an autonomous women's movement. WAF is, to some extent,

trying to deal with this by setting up legal, publicity and research cells to provide additional information and infrastructural backup support to lend weight to the importance of such information.

Certain chapters, as well as individuals within WAF, have stressed the non-political character of the movement. What this means is not being apolitical but unattached or autonomous of any political formation. The assertion of being non-political has served the organization well as a tactical device. This, combined with the fact that the wives of many prominent bureaucrats and upper class males are active in its ranks, has contributed to the regime allowing WAF to continue. However, this assertion does not hold true for all women's groups and there are indications that this is a fragile existence. The treatment meted out during the last demonstrations indicate that the regime is becoming uncomfortable with the women's movement and beginning to see it as a threat. This response is unavoidable if the movement is to continue to be dynamic. What this means, therefore, is that the movement must link its cause with the struggles for human and democratic rights of all Pakistanis or suffer set backs over and over again. It is unreasonable to expect that a regime which suppresses the rights of the bulk of the population will grant them to women. As soon as WAF openly makes this linkage with other oppressed groups it is likely that the regime will ban it from meeting publicly and legally. However, unless it makes this connection, the Women's Movement will ultimately lose the goodwill of other sectors that are also engaged in a struggle for their rights.

### Conclusion: future directions

Critical to the success of the movement is the manner in which it is able to understand the contradictions of the state and manipulate these to its own advantage, and integrate the question of women's rights within the broader framework of domination and suppression of oppressed classes as a whole.

In order to undertake these tasks, women must engage in serious theoretical work whereby they can pinpoint the structure of the current state, the possibilities and direction of its transformation as well as the causes of women's oppression. The analysis at the level of the state involves a reading of the development and institutionalization of the fascist state, and fascist ideology (cloaked in the guise of Islam), the local and international dimensions of this process, the location of different political formations and social classes vis-a-vis these phenomena, and the possible allies with whom women can link in furthering their cause. This last is, I believe, a crucial dimension for women today and in their future struggle.

The movement also needs to understand the social and cultural roots of women's oppression. Religion is an additional factor in this analysis. This necessitates two things: first, continuing as an **autonomous** force (albeit self-consciously linked to other oppressed groups), **and** a movement that poses resolution of its problem in opposition to Islamic discourse. The point is not to reject Islam but to clearly state that the issue of women's rights is a secular issue of human rights. To continue the discussion with the fundamentalists regarding what is a "just" versus a repressive Islam is to fall into a trap that is being set for women: a no win situation. Not only is this anti-Islam stance doomed to failure but in the long run women will have contributed to thwarting a return to democratic norms and secular discussion. Elements within the movement are cognizant of this problem but so far the practice of WAF has been not to take a position.

Another major issue is how to deal with the regime. Many women, both within the Women's Action Forum, as well as those connected with parties and organizations further to the left, have criticized the organization for engaging in activities where they **appealed** to Zia's regime for a betterment of their conditions, and did not **demand** that they be given these rights. These critics view the regime as illegitimate, hence perceive no justification for granting it a certain degree of legitimacy. Indications are that

WAF is changing in this respect. For example, as their numbers have grown, and they have become more confident, women have resorted less to petitions and more to direct action.

That women have gained national attention is without doubt. Whether they will be able to combine this with fundamental change for all Pakistani women is a more complicated matter. In order to accomplish this the movement must avoid becoming entrapped in Islamicist discourse and must avoid letting itself be limited to the question of legal rights. The latter runs the danger of letting both the state and bourgeois elements within the movement determine its tenor. Even if these rights were granted they mean very little in actually transforming the reality of most Pakistani women. In order to achieve real change, therefore, formalism must be shed, and this can only be done if the agenda is set by those elements within the movement that are the most advanced and understand the combined effects of gender, class and national oppression.

The women's struggle in Pakistan will not be won overnight. Regardless of whether the military regime remains or goes it is a struggle that will continue. Social relations of oppression cannot be easily transformed. The proponents of the women's movement, must, therefore, prepare for an extended struggle. This they can do if they develop the organizational capacity to face a future when they are no longer permitted to operate legally, by forging close links with the most progressive sectors of the society and by maintaining their relative autonomy on the gender question.

Since August 1983 the political situation has undergone a qualitative change. When WAF initiated its work it was appropriate for it to maintain its non-political stand. However, it becomes very important that WAF and the movement develop some kind of working relationship with the active struggle for the restoration of democratic rights. By so doing women can force other progressive groups to seriously address the question of women's rights and women will have created a reservoir of good will that will serve them in carrying their struggle into the future. Now and in the future however it is vital that the autonomy of the movement be maintained.

The women's movement is at a crossroads. It can go further, remain confined to a losing battle with the state or run the danger of becoming coopted by it. Which of these tendencies wins depends on how the movement handles the various theoretical, tactical and organizational questions addressed earlier. It also depends on other progressive groups. The women's movement cannot go it alone in challenging the regime. It is necessary for women to understand that their issues are not isolated from those of other segments of society. This understanding can be created only if they are willing to engage in serious dialogue and action with other groups, and if women are able to expand their activities to address the needs and encourage the involvement of women from the most oppressed classes. The corollary of this is that progressive organizations, particularly of the left, must understand that the women's movement cannot develop as far or as fast as they might like. There must also be a certain degree of understanding that the relationship between such an autonomous movement and the left is not an antagonistic one but will serve to strengthen both forces which seek to fight oppression. The need therefore is to forge a real alliance not merely one of appearances. Women have taken certain preliminary steps towards this. It now remains for other progressive elements to join ranks so that a reconstituted Pakistan emerges, not merely democratic, but a place where domination and subordination become words one merely encounters in history books as does the mention of military rule.

### Notes

(1) *The U.S. can no longer utilize Iran as a source of control in the area as it was able to do during the Shah's time. Afghanistan, on the other hand, was never under U.S. aegis. However since the invasion of Afghanistan by the URSS any possibility of*

*change that the U.S. might have envisaged has been shattered. It also means that Pakistan has acquired a status as a front-line state, which the U.S. wishes to use to stop "Soviet expansionism". That this "special" status will continue to be attributed to Pakistan is of course questionable. Partly this will be determined by the internal constellation of forces within Pakistan, but an additional factor is the outcome of Indian politics in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination.*

(2) *Both secularism and democratic rights are issues, the subversion of which affects workers, peasants, the landless, women, minorities, and nationalities. For the bourgeois class a restoration of these rights means a greater degree of share in political power and greater access to decisions determining surplus distribution and appropriation ; their immediate being and placement in society remains relatively unchanged.*

(3) *Most of the Muslim women involved in this process did not work independently among women but more often than not alongside male family members.*

(4) *Quaid-e-Azam, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Aligarh University, 1944*

(5) *This term signifying "unbeliever" refers to Jinnah's opposition to a theocratic state of Pakistan as a homeland of Muslims, but not an Islamic state (itself a contradiction in terms). It had also in the post-partition period provided the basis for suppressing the rights of the nationalities, in particular, as well as of other sectors of the populace. All muslim religious leaders in this period did not oppose the creation of Pakistan on the same grounds. There was a substantial segment among them, led by people like Maulana Azad, who saw the struggle as being primarily anti-British, anti-colonial, and nationalist (within the context of an united India). Similarly, the Khilafat movement leadership struggled in an anti-colonial effort, and refused to recognize the validity of an Islamic state claiming that the "nation" of Islam was not a geographically localized entity but rather the world. It is interesting to note that this position denies the rationale for a theocracy such as is now being supported and pushed by mullahs in Pakistan. It is also interesting to note that this history of religious opposition to Pakistan on these particular grounds is repressed in Pakistan as is the secular character and democratic program for an independent Pakistan envisaged by Jinnah. In government offices in today's Pakistan, Jinnah's picture (which one always saw present) is often conspicuous by its absence.*

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# Punjab Women Lawyers' Association

## Introduction

The current women's movement in Pakistan has been instrumental in the emergence of women's organisations working for the protection of women's rights. Women lawyers have been in the forefront of this movement. The Punjab Women Lawyer's Association was formed in 1982, and has since then played an important role in highlighting the major problems confronting women in the area of law. The membership of the Association comprises of women lawyers and law graduates. Law students are eligible for student membership. The Association was the founder member of Women's Action Forum, an organisation actively working for the rights of women.

## Activities

The Association initiated the struggle against discriminatory laws and has brought this issue to public view. Our effective campaign against these laws and our efforts towards the establishment of an equal status for women have received appreciation and acclaim, nationally and internationally. The famous protest against the new law of evidence staged by women in Lahore on the 12th of February, 1983, was the result of the call given by the Punjab Women Lawyer's Association. Since then, the Association has, in collaboration and with the support of other organisations, been an effective pressure group for the prevention of discrimination against women in all fields.

The activities of the Association have not been concentrated on resistance alone. Programmes have been designed and carried out for the progress of women and women lawyers. Activities in the past have included numerous seminars and symposia on laws concerning women. These programmes have been of tremendous help in increasing awareness of their rights amongst women, which is a one of the major objectives of the Association. The Association has also participated in and sponsored programmes organised by many women's organisations jointly. One of such programmes is the celebration of the International Women's Day every year since 1983.

## **Punjab Women Lawyers' Association... (cont.)**

### Aims and objectives

1. For a forum where practicing women lawyers, women graduates of law and undergraduates of law can get together in order to discuss common issues.
2. To ensure independence, freedom and equality for women lawyers in practicing their vocation.
3. To encourage more women to join the legal profession by providing assistance and guidance to women who are undergraduates of law.
4. To disseminate information where legal provisions or its lack of implementation frustrates the freedom and independence of the legal profession.
5. To provide free legal aid to destitute women and children, Also to make them aware of their legal rights.
6. To scrutinise legal provisions so that lobbying of equitable laws generally and particularly regarding women and children can be carried out.
7. To seek the passage of legislation for granting women and children effective, easier and convenient ways in which they can exercise their rights.

8. To publish articles, pamphlets, periodicals or newsletter to enhance the awareness of individuals to their legal rights and to make them familiar to the forums through which they can assert their rights.
9. To co-operate with organized women's associations, other judicial associations in particular, associations formed by men or women in the legal profession.

## Issues addressed by the association

### 1. Family and personal status laws

The Association has worked continuously for a change in the substantive as well as the procedural law which has given undue advantage to Muslim husbands, in the areas of divorce, the consequential financial settlements and child custody.

The law of polygamy has been and still is a subject of great controversy. The Association has always supported the view that polygamy should be recognised as a social evil and legal bars should be placed on this practice. We, however, maintain that a change in the law of divorce has to precede any steps in this direction in order to prevent subjecting women to further hardships.

The inequality in the law of inheritance as applicable to Muslims, is cause of great concern to women. Incidentally this law is one of the major reasons for Pakistan's refusal to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. In spite of the sensitive nature of the issue, in view of the involvement of Muslim Personal Law in the matter, the Association is continuing its efforts for the enforcement of more equitable law in this area.

### II. Islamic penal laws

The Punjab Women Lawyers Association was the first women's organisation to attack the discriminatory provisions of the Hadd Ordinances, regarding rape, adultery and other offences specifically punishable under Islamic Law, enforced in 1979. As an initial step the Association highlighted the objectionable provisions of these laws which adversely affected the status of Muslim women in Pakistan. The main objection to these laws was to the provisions regarding quantum of evidence required to prove the offence for awarding the maximum punishment to the offender. The provisions restricted admissible oral evidence to male, muslim witnesses only, thereby ousting the evidence of women even in case of rape where they are the victims of the offence.

Furthermore, the evidence provisions of these laws coupled with the law of Qazf (false imputation of rape or adultery), was created a dangerous position for victims of rape. If they are unable to prove rape they are on the one hand liable to be punished for slander, and on the other they can be punished for adultery. This serious flaw in the law was highlighted by the case of a blind girl, Safia Bibi.

The association has tried to combat the disadvantages issuing to women out these laws by taking up cases of victims and contesting them in the courts. One of such cases was that of Safia Bibi.

The Association gained the support of other women's organisations on these issues, and also brought the injustices of these laws to public view through the press and other media.

In the wake of the Hadd Ordinances came the proposal for a new law of evidence, which not only confirmed the evidence provisions of Hadd Ordinance, but also provided that in all other matters the evidence required would be that of two men or one man and two women.

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