

In defence of coeducation

By Murtaza Ali Jafri

COEDUCATIONAL institutions in Pakistan, of late, have come under more than their fair share of criticism, especially with the installation in the NWFP of an MMA government. Opponents of coed schools and colleges say that the mixing of the sexes is sinful and not sanctioned by religion and point out that in a truly Islamic state girls and boys should be educated separately.

On the face of it, it doesn't sound unreasonable if students in general are allowed to choose between studying in a coed or same-sex institution. However, what is wrong is to impose one's view on the rest of the population, which is precisely what the MMA government wants to do — and if they had their way they would probably try and force it on the rest of the country too.

These critics somehow have this naive notion that today's young people have nothing on their minds but to be interested in members of the opposite sex and that to get closer to them they will resort to anything. In fact, such an approach shows that those who think like this are themselves quite perverted. It would be fine if they thought this way and kept their opinions to themselves and didn't foist them on the rest of the world, but that is unfortunately not the case. These guardians of morality think that they have the solutions to all the problems in the world and that everyone must abide by what they say.

Clearly, they don't see the benefits to young people of studying in a coeducational environment. Contrary to what the more conservative might think, continuous interaction with members of the opposite sex promotes respect and understanding for each others' points of view. Apart from that inter-gender relationships are fostered and both boys and girls learn much-needed social skills.

As far as teachers are concerned, they too are in different camps. Some tend to believe that if both boys and girls are present in a classroom then neither will be able to concentrate on the lesson or that at least the potential for distraction exists. But a male friend could as easily distract a male student and the same is probably true for girls. Some teachers, however, feel that the studying in a coed school is an important step because it gives students confidence, helps them mature and enables them to acquire valuable social skills. They believe that the school is an institution where positive change in society can be implemented by slowly ingraining mutual respect between what will be society's future leaders.

Coeducation gives young people the opportunity to remove misconceptions that arise from segregated schooling. It also promotes a work ethic where men and women see no shame in working together and this allows respect to develop for each others' capabilities — very important in our patriarchal society. ■

The writer is an A-level student in a coed school in Karachi.