

Gender Daily It's a man's race after all

27/9/05

THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF Pakistan is on, editorialised one paper. Another comment held forth about Pakistan's inability to win any races in life as long as women were not running alongside the men. A politician thundered that the women of Pakistan would not be disgraced. For some it was a matter of civilisation and progress: how does anyone expect a country that can't even let its women run, progress and be modern? For others women on the trot were tantamount to secularisation and westernisation of Pakistani society.

Strong and dramatic words. Perhaps the only thing missing was a declamation that Pakistan was at a crossroads and had to make a decision about which way it was headed.

All this was triggered off by a 'marathon' scheduled in Gujranwala which the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal forcibly stopped. The MMA was predictably trashed for the disruption and the violence. Its critics included those who have bought into General Pervez Musharraf's enlightened moderation. They are still spitting fire for the government's 'cowardly' backtracking in the face of MMA muscle — the mixed marathons planned elsewhere either postponed or officially made segregated affairs. Make no mistake, the liberal government ensured the women did run; just not in public but in girls' colleges. (No one of course asked how a jog around a campus translated into a marathon. Mere technicalities.)

No one should doubt the government's commitment to women's rights, particularly the right to run.

The MMA too stands firm. They have vowed not to allow the government to spread 'obscenity' and of course insult their sisters, wives and daughters by forcing them to run.

Hence the debate that people appeared to take seriously. For once no one suggested that women and marathons are a non-issue, trivial matters that divert attention from real issues.

The battle is on. The lines have been clearly drawn and the populace seems to be standing in line, on one side or the other. But look again.

The battle lines have been drawn by *men*. Stands have been taken and loudly proclaimed by *men*. The protestations are loud but are not all the voices we hear *masculine*? Those whose rights are apparently at stake are silent.

Which is why in my opinion this is a non-issue; why all that

VIEW



ARIFA NOOR

The battle lines have been drawn by men. Stands have been taken and loudly proclaimed by men. The protestations are loud but are not all the voices we hear masculine? ... How can it be about women's rights if it is men that are leading the debate, deciding its parameters and telling women what the authentic Pakistani woman is like?

was written and said about it was tripe.

How can it be about women's rights if it is men that are leading the debate, deciding its parameters and telling women what the authentic Pakistani woman is like?

I would rather not let men be the custodians of women's rights. And not just the bearded *mullahs* but also the men and the institutions that created the Hudood laws; encouraged the *panchayats* that awarded gang-rapes to women and till the new millennium were unwilling to allow women to marry of their own free choice.

From where I stand, this is not a battle for the soul of Pakistan but a puppet show in which men hold the strings. The battle is over what dance the puppet will perform for the gratification of the audience.

The self-proclaimed enlightened lot wants the puppet to take part in marathons. She has to stand side by side with the men and play a role in the progress and development of the country. They want to sell a liberal image and the Pakistani woman can be the best advertisement — even better if she runs in a marathon.

The second group harks back with nostalgia to the good ol' days when we, or rather the male rulers, sold not moderation and enlightenment but Islam. They want the *chador aur chaar devari* back. Their puppet needs to stand a little further away

from the men; appearing in the public sphere when necessary but not really a part of it. And definitely, not running.

The battle is between these two (groups of men). It is a battle to decide who determines what civilisation, progress and culture mean — and, of course, the tune the puppet will eventually dance to.

This is why I'd rather not get involved in this battle. For it would mean accepting that I am so inept that not only do others have to fight my battles for me, they also have to tell me what those battles entail.

The point is not whether I agree with one script or the other, one performance or the other; as long as the authority to direct it lies with the other, I'd rather not join the tableau. I would rather curl up on the sofa in front of the TV. I'd rather run later — choosing the time and the place myself.

The writer is a staff member