

# Combating gender bias

Gender

Dina

201-105 By Murtaza Razvi

THE plight of women in this country is not restricted to the evil they face in obscurant laws enacted by an oppressive and regressive dictator or indeed to honour killing alone. Nor anymore is women's emancipation linked to the packing of the assemblies and local bodies with 33 per cent female members. This has proved to be little more than the fad of an enlightened and moderate autocrat.

The entire attitude towards women is degrading. For the multitude of women who may never be subjected to the Hudood Ordinances or found sullying the family honour, nor indeed make it into assemblies, gender bias begins and ends within the four protective walls called home.

For many, their only window on the world is the electronic media, which we are told has never been freer. Ironically, that freedom is now being used by some educated and seemingly liberal women, who appear as experts in TV talk shows, to reinforce gender stereotypes.

Tune in any channel on the 'free' media, that is if you are liberal enough to have your freedoms beamed into your home and PTV is not your only choice, and you'll know what is meant here.

Better still, why do you think so many men call into live FM radio shows to complain about their wives being demanding; the answer: only to be put at ease by an educated and respected female soothsayer.

The advice offered to an errant woman inadvertently is: 'mend your ways or you shall burn in hell.'

One anchorwoman said the other day that no man is expected to feed his wife without being charmed by her. Another on another channel broke into a pathetic soliloquy when a man called in

Though most middle class parents will put their daughters through college and university, many would not allow their qualified daughter to take up a job after she graduates. There are cases even of young women holding professional degrees in medicine, engineering and architecture who have been barred by their families from joining the job market.

So what do these young women do sitting at home all day? Many are expected to help their mothers in household chores or give tuition to neighbourhood youngsters, preferably girls, that does not involve leaving their parents' protective home environment.

Mothers worrying about their daughter's marriage are also known to raise sons who forbid their sisters from working in a mixed office environment where, it is believed, prying male colleagues have an eye for women co-workers.

What then is the vocation of an educated girl while her time away at home? She joins her mother in the gloom that has descended upon the family in the form of 'no eligible bachelor is seeking her hand in marriage'.

Unless enlightened opinion makers, writers, politicians and sociologists come forward, a society in transformation such as ours has little hope of leaving behind the notions of family honour resting on women's chastity alone. Every household that makes the dubious distinction between what is socially and morally right and what is not based on gender alone is guilty of killing the honour of its own daughters within the protective walls of its own home. Is it any wonder then that our 'graduate' assemblies and 33 per cent of women sitting there have failed to do away with legislation as inimical to women as the Hudood Ordinances?

add more sections to their secondary levels to accommodate the rush.

A section of affluent young 'begums' who would not allow their daughters eligible for class six and above the freedom of studying in a co-ed environment will squarely put the blame on media exposure.

It is customary to say that back in their teens they themselves were not exposed to the kind of lewdness their impressionable girls are now exposed to via the cable in their own homes. And this is where the hypocrisy of it all lies.

Who controls TV viewing in the home? one may ask. 'You can't', will be the standard answer.

This is because many parents, even the most highly educated ones, have nowadays come to believe that it is the school's job to do the upbringing too. Hence the shifting of the emphasis on 'what school is your daughter going to?'

The point missed here is that while the school will only provide the schooling, the parenting will have to be done by the parents themselves. And that responsibility does not end at getting your daughter into the right school.

There is nothing wrong with making a choice whether one wants to send one's children to a co-ed school or not. What is depressing to note is that the question will rarely be raised by mothers about their male children.

More surprising still, the same mother who would be wary of sending her daughter to a co-ed school would find nothing wrong with it when it comes to making the choice for her son. This is not only hypocritical on the part of the parents but is also indicative of the gender bias that continues to exist across all strata of urban society.

There is something seriously wrong with such attitudes. Where, one wonders, are the writers, scholars and opinion-makers who would challenge these false notions of chastity

soliloquy  
when a man called in  
to complain that his wife was  
'probably' cheating on him.

Suspicion, the obvious evil, did not cross the mind of the wise soothsayer, who said men cheating on their wives was bad but a woman cheating on her husband is infinitely worse and unacceptable in our culture. Religious values were also cited to lend credence to the admonishment.

And this was in Karachi, arguably the most liberal of our cities. What then to speak of the rural hinterland and the tribal/feudal customs prevailing there? The problem is so pervasive that it is sickening. Why must a gender distinction be drawn between a wrong act committed by either sex? What is wrong is equally wrong for both, but for our messed up values based on hypocrisy rather than religion or culture. It is in reality the negation of the latter.

It has become fashionable to ascribe such phoney values to the prevalence of feudal/tribal culture or to rampant ignorance in the far-flung hinterland, of which many of us urbanites only have little experience, if at all.

This is not to defend what goes on in the rural areas, but it is not these areas from where we beam into homes our so-called newfound freedom via the idiot box. How many times have we heard that exposure to media can bring about big change in our society? It is this very media that we need to change social attitudes towards women.

In many educated urban households around the country grown-up daughters continue to be seen as a burden on the family.

The resulting self-pity becomes so pronounced with every passing year that the educated girl often falls victim to manic depression, with old parents complaining they can't even die in peace. This attitude is entirely self-imposed and derived from misconceived notions of what our society and culture should or should not permit, as opposed to what they do permit.

With the passage of time, however, social attitudes towards the girl child are undergoing change, some for the better, others for the worse. A new breed of young mothers has evolved over the past few years that comprises women raised in a liberal family environment back in their parents' homes. Many of these young mothers may themselves have gone to co-ed schools and colleges, with some indeed having married for love.

Converted somewhere along the path to newfound religiosity of the showcase variety, many can now be seen hounding co-ed school managements insisting that their daughters should not be subjected to co-education beyond the primary level. A number of top-notch schools in Karachi and Lahore have been forced to separate girls from boys as they promote school-children to class six. Others force their daughters to leave the non-compliant school and seek admission in an all-girls school. A class six entry survey in a given girls' school will reveal how prevalent this trend is, with some schools forced to

notions of chastity that have such a pronounced gender bias built into them. At the end of the day the onus of society as a whole having good or bad morals continues to be put squarely on women — be it city life or that in the backwaters of the tribal rural hinterland.

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Is it any wonder then that our 'graduate' assemblies and 33 per cent of women sitting there, and presided over by an all-powerful president who advocates 'enlightened moderation', have failed to do away with legislation as inimical to women as the Hudood Ordinances? But the truth remains that the government's failure to do so does not absolve the urban intelligentsia of its social responsibility to step in and make its voice of sanity heard.

It also does not absolve those mainstream political parties who claim to espouse enlightened, liberal and secular ideals.

It is a sin to blame a handful of obscure parties for the dismal state of affairs without the more responsible ones doing what is expected of them.