

Courtrooms and women's honour

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Men and women of full age are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. — Universal Declaration Of Human Rights, Article 16.

who goes to the court has to face further humiliation and disgrace, not only from the society alone, but also from the people who represent fairness, impartiality, equality and justice. Women who finally resort to courts after years of suppression and tyranny are further humiliated by lawyers, audience in the courtroom and most of all the judges.

Women complain of sexual remarks, gestures and innuendoes in courts. These often take the form of looks accompanied by remarks muttered under breath, and sometimes by more abusive language and suggestive gestures like licking of lips, winking and flying kisses. Brushing and touching is also another form of harassment in courts — Ameena Malik pens down the complaints of several women who have to go to courts for one reason or another.

According to 'A' who sought divorce: "I was made to feel as I was wrong and should go back. He did not ask me much, but the way he looked at me made me

feel uncomfortable, the tone of the judge was as if he was not interested in my case. The gender bias of the judges is very strongly felt in cases relating to dissolution of marriage, adultery and marriage by choice. Because in such cases, the obvious disapproval of the judges begins to show in terms of their tone or behaviour against women, who have or may have violated the stereotyped social norms."

According to another woman: "What I did not like about the judge was that he kept telling me that a woman's place is at home, by the side of her husband so I should go home. I feel scared what if the judge does not listen to me because I'm right!"

Most of the judges in courts are males and often it is felt by women under trial that the judges address them differently from the manner they address a male. In some cases, the judges do not even talk to women, which intensifies the feeling that they as a person do not matter, and what they have to say is unimportant or considered irrelevant. According to F: "The judge has never spoken to me, never listens to me. I am really scared of the outcome of my case."



Illustration by Khalid

The whole environment of the courtroom is that of harassment for a woman. Majority of women has to face staring, sexual remarks, gestures, comments on personal appearance and offensive conduct by lawyers, judges and courtroom personnel. According to Z: "They stare as if I am dirty — I want the earth to open and swallow me."

According to another woman who wants divorce from her

husband and has her case under trial, "The men look as if this is some big market and we are up for auction." Another woman remarked: "They looked as if they were taking my clothes off."

*Take her hand, raise it to your lips
Bend down to brow
Push back her straggling hair
Reveal her eyes
Cast away their shadows of*

*despair
Look deep into them
Together stand tall as Man and Woman
Equal In the eyes of all men! — Alys Faiz*

The woman who resorts to court to seek freedom from the unfair behaviour of her husband, has to prove her own innocence. The stark and humiliating remarks that are cut in front of

It is amazing that the word 'honour' around which our whole society revolves, is not even acknowledged by computers. Honour — though just a word, can play havoc with the lives of women who in order to maintain a man's respect usually have to give up their entire existence.

Nevertheless, life has become so shallow and superficial that sometimes one feels like breaking away from this single-dimensional world of pretence and insensitivity.

Every human has the right of independence but it is a paradox that the reality of this fact is no more than a myth and fiction. It attains an even shameful attire when the question of freedom of a woman is raised in our society. The right of making an independent decision about their own lives is negated to them. And the ones who stand against this norm have to pay a heavy price. The word divorce is a stigma that engulfs the mere existence of a woman and makes her survival next to impossible.

Ironically, the people who are there to provide justice, target women themselves. Anybody,

her, make her the one who has committed wrong. She is thought to be an immoral woman, as she is demanding a divorce. "Go and decent women do not ask for divorce, was what I had to listen from a lawyer", replies perplexed Hina.

Women who go to the courts complain of sexual remarks, gestures and innuendoes. These often take the form of looks accompanied by remarks muttered under breath, and sometimes by more abusive language and suggestive gestures like licking of lips, winking and flying kisses. "They stare, they sit together, talk about us and point at us," replies another woman.

Brushing and touching is also another form of harassment which women have to frequently go through in courts. "They brush against us, they treat us like prostitutes," lamented Asma. According to another woman, "Men deliberately brush against you or come in the way, there is no place in the courts to throw a pin, let alone for a woman to pass." Words like *Bismillah* and *Mashallah* are commonly used along with expressive looks, to convey views about a woman's attire. According to Hadia, "Once outside the court, a person said 'Bismillah seeing you has cooled my heart'. It made me feel ashamed, angry and humiliated." According to another woman,

"Once I wore yellow and so many people in the court called me yellow taxi."

Accordingly, there should be more female lawyers and judges, especially for family courts. They should also be given special training to adopt a polite, sensitive and understanding attitude towards woman. The stereotyped thinking towards women especially in regard to dissolution of marriage, should be changed. A better and more conducive environment should be adopted in courts. There should be more protection for women against aimless and wandering men whose sole purpose is to harass women.

Consequently, courts are there to provide respite to the people from the tribulations they have had to face. These represent justice, impartiality and fairness. And therefore the environment in the courtroom and its premises should not be in any way of harassment — especially for women. Court is a symbol of justice and if people feel scared of even going there then it speaks volume about the quality of law that prevails in our country. Hence courts are there to protect our pride and respect and not to further humiliate and disgrace a person.

Send your suggestions to
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