**[‘This is Pakistan…’](https://www.dawn.com/news/1829657/this-is-pakistan)**

[Faisal Bari](https://www.dawn.com/authors/568/faisal-bari) Published April 26, 2024 Updated a day ago

A YOUNG man cheated on one of his assignments. His professor referred the case to the relevant committee for investigation and adjudication. I was, at the time, the department chair. The mother of the young man called and said she wanted to see me even though I explained to her that the case was with the relevant committee and I could not intervene in the process. When she came, accompanied by one of her brothers, she started out by saying that she had lost her husband and the young man his father. I offered my condolences but did point out that since her husband had passed away many years ago, this could not really explain why the young man had cheated.

She was not thrilled by my response. The next thing she said was: “It was just cheating. What is the big deal? It happens all the time in Pakistan. Do you not live in Pakistan?”

When this outburst was also not helpful, she went on to tell me that one of her brothers was a senior civil servant while another was a senior officer in the army and I should be aware of the consequences if we insisted on taking the case further. At that point, I had to ask her to leave my office.

When I narrated the incident to the others, the typical response was, ‘this is Pakistan. What did you expect? Where do you live?’

How is asking for quality in work an issue of citizenship?

I do live in Pakistan and have lived here most of my life. Two hundred and forty million-plus people also live in Pakistan and they come in all shapes and sizes. However normalised or institutionalised cheating might become, why should we accept it as normal? And if some people, and I am sure it is not some people but many people, do not accept cheating as normal, why does that leave a question mark on their citizenship or their ability to live, survive and thrive in this society? It seems that such arguments are the refuge of those who do not have an argument.

Recently, I had a reminder of this way of thinking from a very different domain. We have some renovation going on in our house. The mason and other people working on the renovation say they will show up at 8am but do not show up till 11am; if they do, they work at a snail’s pace even though they are not on a daily wage contract, are exceptionally careless about cleanliness, have to be reminded of things constantly, compromise on the quality of work unless supervised all the time (literally), and try to make money any way they can in procurement and/ or usage. It is almost as if you cannot rely on anything they say. When we had that discussion with their boss, after the initial to and fro, his response was “this is Pakistan. This is not how things happen here. Where do you think you live? Are you sure you have been living in Pakistan?”

How is not coming to work on time a character trait? How is asking for quality in work an issue of citizenship?

The underlying issue seems to be different. If a tailor does not deliver your clothes on time, what can you do? If the breach of a verbal promise or contract, and in many cases in Pakistan even on written contracts, has no consequences for the party breaching the agreement, they will not take the contract seriously. It will be a matter of convenience for them.

If the mason comes late, what can you do? You can shout at him, and if he is smart he will say ‘sorry’ but continue doing what is convenient for him. You can fire the mason and change your tailor, but the cost of doing so for you can be significant in terms of finding an alternative and/ or developing a new relationship. If the mason or tailor has a big enough clientele and he/ she knows that the cost of finding an alternative for you can be significant, the mason or tailor has certain leeway. You can keep shouting and he will keep hearing and not listening and the work will continue the same way.

This is an interesting and significant incompletion of the market. If behaviour had consequences — say there was a central information portal that rated all masons and tailors and poor ratings impacted the work the mason or tailor would get — he or she would care.

Imagine the extreme impact of reputational damage: if you were late in delivery of clothes by one day to one client, it would mean a complete loss of reputation and all future tailoring work. In such circumstances, do you think the tailor, barring extreme unavoidable circumstances that are allowed for in most contracts, would fail to deliver on time? Of course, this is an extreme scenario to make the point. But the provider would take into account the extent of reputational damage resulting from a breach of contract.

Of course there can be legal remedies for such breaches, but the law is an unwieldy, slow-moving and costly way to deal with issues. Unless the matter is grave and involves a significant money or other loss, invoking the law for such matters seems impractical and an overkill. It has to be through potential loss of business due to reputational impacts. This will not make the system work well in every case, but it will make things better, just as the ratings on Airbnb or Uber etc work — with some margin of unresolved issues but better than when there is no reputational impact of poor delivery.

It will cure this righteous attitude of asking about the other person’s citizenship, and saying this is how things are done in Pakistan and implying the other person is not fit to survive, live and thrive in Pakistan.

*The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.*

*Published in Dawn, April 26th, 2024*