

# Crusade for rights

In Pakistan's highly conservative and orthodox society, divorce is still considered a taboo. Divorce among women, especially is a matter of shame and degradation — not just for the woman but also for her family.

In a country where 'honour' of the citizens depends on the woman, her divorce is taken as a rebellion against the system.

*Whenever a woman asks for divorce, she is discouraged from all corners of society including her own family members. She undergoes a traumatic situation throughout the period and faces unimaginable pressure in the way of seeking her right. **Bazgha Iqbal** says that it is the woman who suffers most in such cases*

Normally, a girl in our society is supposed to usually stay at home, have few friends, and not go out much. With such a background, to be suddenly left alone and quite helpless usually proves to be too great a pressure to bear and she quietly succumbs to it. Leaving the daughters or sisters in the lurch at a time when they really need them, people manage to turn the woman around and make her accept her defeat.

What has changed is the fact that there is some resistance to the conformist attitudes of the society. The resistance may not be overly aggressive or very obvious but it can be visible through subtle changes in the system of things here. The change has been brought around by various elements, some of which include different NGOs and some dedicated individuals who have tried to make a difference in the way women are made to bow down before fate.

Today, her peers may pressurize her in the same manner but there is an alternative for her, somewhere she can go and seek help. While this is not an easy task and women are still not able to approach such places, the fact that a woman does have choice other than suffering in silence, shows that we have indeed progressed even if it has been slow.

Fatima, a divorcee underwent extreme pressure from her family and relatives to keep her marriage working. "If I had even a little hope that I could make it (the marriage) work I would have

The second step is by completely refusing to help her in any sort of legal work. Though women are getting educated by dozen here, they still remain ignorant of anything outside their own homes. Studying in schools and colleges and usually being escorted by either parent or by their brothers, girls end up literate but still dependent. Without the help of their families, most women tend to feel insecure and people make no efforts to hide the fact that they find single or divorced women an unsuitable company.

With the help of legal aid agencies such as AGHS legal aid centre and other NGOs, at least one part of the struggle has been overcome. These units work for providing women the resources and the information they require. Still the goal is far from being achieved. Women running these help centres are often blamed for divorces themselves and are accused of trying to 'mislead' the young women.

The first crisis centre for women was opened in 1997 in Islamabad. Although the government started the centre and it was backed by many, basic attitude of people has still not changed towards any institution that offers help to the distressed women. The most sought after places for women and girls trying to end their marriages and facing opposition from their own families as well, are still the Dar-ul-Amans and women hostels run by different NGOs.

For women, sheltered from childhood by their parents, the experience proves to be challenging and very demanding. Those who come out of their problems are strong and more confident about themselves but there are many who give up their fights midway. Reconciliation between two spouses is very refreshing but acceptance by the one, does not make a healthy marriage. And so, the divorcee still faces the same stares and the same judgmental attitudes by most people of the society.

(the marriage work I would have tried", she says.

What really happens when a woman asks for a divorce? Whether it's a woman from an educated, literate family or someone from a relatively poorer background, the reaction to their decision is usually same. The very first method to be employed is the use of blackmail by the woman's family. Having children proves to be most tricky and here women always give in and if they don't, they suffer being labeled as bad, callous mothers, leaving their children and taking a divorce.