**A feminist manifesto**

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In a country like Pakistan where progressive mobilisation is undermined by both the state and society, it is a legitimate question to ask whether there is an organised women’s rights movement in the country.

This issue is addressed at length by feminist scholars Farida Shaheed and Ayesha Khan in their respective essays in the book ‘Womansplaining’, edited by Sherry Rehman and published by Folio Books.

Ayesha Khan writes as an unapologetic insider on the women’s rights movement, and Farida Shaheed, also an insider, attempts to analyse it from a dispassionate perspective.

For both writers, the modern women’s movement started in 1981 with the birth of the Women Action Forum (WAF) that mobilised women against anti-women policies of the Ziaul Haq dictatorship. Given the plethora of anti-women laws – the Hudood Ordinance, the Law of Evidence, or the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance – added to the statute books, the fight of the feminists of the 1980s was with the state, and hence their reactive activism was state-centric.

In contrast, millennial activism of the new generation is society-centric and deals with personal liberties mostly. The new wave of feminism also brings sexuality into focus that older feminists did not dwell upon.

Khan also acknowledges the achievements of the pioneering feminists of the 1950s and 1960s whose work led to the promulgation of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance in 1961, reserved quota for women in legislative assemblies, and the family planning programme of 1965.

Shaheed explains that despite all the challenges that the women’s rights movement faced in the 1980s, feminists were able to put women’s voice on the national agenda so much so that even the right wing felt that it needed to take women’s issues into account in its own way. Although there were discriminatory laws against women, offensive recommendations such as those by the Ansari Commission were abandoned due to pressure from women’s rights groups.

During the ‘decade of democracy’, from 1988 to 1999, women’s rights activists’ relationship with the governments of Benazir Bhutto was that of cooperation and with the governments of Nawaz Sharif that of confrontation due to anti-progressive policies. In 1995, women activists actively collaborated with the state in drafting documents for the Beijing Conference.

Due to the availability of funding opportunities post-Beijing Conference, there was a mushroom growth of civil society organisations and women’s organisations “very few of which were movement-linked” according to Shaheed. It started what is known as the ‘NGOisation’ of the movement. The agenda shifted from a more political focus to technical aspects.

A considerable amount of work was done by these organisations on gender-based violence, workers’ rights, political participation, and education amongst others; yet their achievements happened in ‘silos’ rather than as a unified movement. The movement got dispersed.

From 2015 onwards, the third generation of feminists has come to prominence. WAF’s chapters have opened up in Hyderabad and Quetta by the ‘in-between generation’ of women activists. The WAF Hyderabad chapter is the most active.

Other young feminists established their own initiatives such as Girls at Dhabas, Feminist Fridays, the Feminist Collective, the Women’s Democratic Front, and the Women’s Collective. The priorities and modalities of the activism of young feminists differ from that of the old WAF’s.

In 2018, on International Women’s Day (March 8), young feminists organised the first Aurat March in Karachi; they were assisted by older feminists as well. Thousands of women from diverse backgrounds participated in the march. Since 2018, the march has become an annual feature, and it has also spread to all other big and small cities.

Some of the placards that talked about personal liberties led to serious social media backlash. There were many other more ‘serious’ posters about women’s socio-political and economic rights that were ignored; yet a few catchy posters ignited public debate. In a conclave of women, those belonging to the grassroots did not object to the posters dealing with personal liberties during the Aurat March.

The women’s movement has always been blamed for being too elitist and not reflecting the concerns of women at the grassroots level. Yet, women’s activism supported grassroots movements such as the Sindhiani Tehreek in rural Sindh, Okara peasants’ movement in Punjab, PTM in former Fata, and many such other initiatives to support women in need.

One major contribution of the women’s rights movement has been in the area of legislation. Over the last 40 years, women activists have helped women parliamentarians pass many pro-women laws and made attempts to curtail the harmful impact of discriminatory laws as much as possible.

Khan states, “There is no doubt that without the women’s movement we would have no laws to protect women from rape, honour killings, acid crimes, domestic violence, sexual harassment and regressive customary laws”.

Reserved seats for women in legislative assemblies, women’s caucuses in assemblies, and the national and provincial commissions on the status of women are major contributions that women’s rights groups achieved through their advocacy and mobilisation. Due to the efforts of Asma Jahangir and Hina Jilani, women got the right to marry of their choice.

It remains to be seen whether the Aurat March only remains an annual event or if it gets institutionalised as a national women’s movement. The march is supporting initiatives regularly around the year despite societal backlash.

There is no need to define whether there is a unified women’s movement or not as centralised initiatives could lead to hierarchies. Pro-women mobilisation can be diverse yet effective.

Overall, democratic governments protect the rights of citizens including women better than authoritarian regimes. Hence, deepening democracy needs to be prioritised by women’s movement and citizen groups.

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