**Acknowledging Malala**

[Haya Fatima Sehgal](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/haya-fatima-sehgal/" \o "More Articles by Haya Fatima Sehgal)

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*For International Women’s Day we highlight Malala Yousafzai as being one of the most powerful symbols of Women’s Empowerment in the world today*

The story of Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani girl who was shot in 2012 by militants for expressing her opinions, is known across continents. After surviving the brutal attack, she went on to be an outspoken voice for promoting education. Sadly, several years later, Pakistanis fail to acknowledge the phenomenon that she has become worldwide. An Oxford graduate and the youngest Noble Peace Prize laureate, Malala Yousafzai is an emblem of women’s empowerment. Perhaps it is about time Pakistanis officially acknowledge and honor her heroic bravery. It would be beneficial for us where voices like hers are not disregarded but rather promoted and honored.

Opinions have remained divided because of the various stories circulating about her circumstances. Most of these were unfair and further confounded people into silence or negativity. On one side was an extremist religious faction, which had created a terror network of fear. On another hand were those who denied her story, sparking great divisions and diatribe. Ms. Yousafzai was fortunate to have ample help and support by good people. Yes, mostly these have been foreigners who have supported her by helping her rebuild her life abroad. And there is nothing wrong with that. We must now consider striking a relationship with her existent status. There are many who have not welcomed her warmly over here and all that is by the tone of conversations, lack of media coverage and the unwillingness of upholding her as a national symbol. Even though she visited Pakistan in 2018, one felt it was overall a lukewarm response given as a welcome back.

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It is true that Pakistan has been in a dire need for a vetted educational system where thoughts are not radicalized to extremist viewpoints when they are different from others, but rather, channeled towards balanced discourse. This will only happen when minds are trained to accept different viewpoints through thinking and gaining knowledge.

The Pakistan of today is on an ambitious fast track to progression. It has set a course of governance and strategic plans for education. The current government is trying to raise the standards of education by aligning an equalizing framework for all socio-economic sectors. The groundwork and policies at this moment of time are being devised by thinkers and professionals on a high level. Through adequate discussion and utilizing her influence, Malala’s public service image could also be a great thing for optics. Pakistani authorities could highlight her voice to promote education alongside their own plans to do so. The other thing that is greatly needed is for Pakistan to close its gender gap in education. The literacy rate for women in Pakistan remains below South Asia’s average.

An influencer like Malala could be that voice for millions of girls being given adequate education and equal opportunities in the country. We greatly need support to help promote the economic empowerment of the girl child. All this, to give women and young girls the opportunity to build a better nation. If Ms. Yousafzai provides that hope, then we must stand with her. Perhaps a dialogue can also take place on enlightening her on the current circumstances in Pakistan. Ms. Yousafzai went through extenuating circumstances which stunned the world. However, Pakistan must not becompartmentalized into being seen as gun-toting crazies who shoot down children because they want education. The balance and objectivity are also missing for us to converse on the matter. There is so much more to us than being associated only with miscreant elements who have previously terrorized the nation and its people. Nobody in their right mind or senses would take the side of terrorists. We all fight the same fight against these people.

Pakistan needs a change in the optics that our own people here and abroad should promote. Not much good news of us reaches out to the right segments of the world. We will have to utilize the tools of media, connectivity, and common ground to expedite our narrative abroad. The new US-Pakistan relations are improving day by day and we are hopeful of leaving behind the negative viewpoints associated with us. Pakistan is on the brink of some very good changes. We must create circumstances that accept and honor people like Malala Yousafzai. We need to move ahead with promoting those who could be taking many good conversations about us forward to the western world. A ‘cultural acceptance’ could certainly start by just openly and officially acknowledging this brave youngwoman.

*The writer is known for her articles on cultural impact*