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**Understanding why women march**

It is that time of the year when the women of our country openly raise a voice for their rights. For centuries, patriarchy has been the least noticed yet most significant structure of social inequality.

Pakistan is no exception. Here too patriarchy manifests itself in the structural framework of both society and government. Despite living in the 21st century, most men of our country still find the idea of women demanding basic rights very disquieting. Naturally,it was no surprise to most when a section of the society reacted so negatively to the Aurat March last year. It has always been convenient for those who want to sway attention from the main issue by diverting attention to peripheral ones. Last year, they focused on one particular slogan raised during the march: ‘Mera jism meri marzi’. This year they’ll find a new one while the issue of denial of women rights will persist.

When women say ‘Mera jism meri marzi’, it is like saying ‘My soul, My choice’. While men exercising their freedom of speech may propagate what they consider just and correct, it is the right of women to weigh it on the balance of conscience and to act or reject. It is their choice and for their choice they are answerable not to man but to God. It is ironic that in some Western societies where they are prevented from wearing a hijab, it is once again women who are being discriminated against.

This march is for the right to say no when she doesn’t feel like doing something. If it is right for a man to say no to his wife, the same should apply the other way round as well. While it is a centuries-old tradition that a man earns for the woman, it is her right to earn if she so chooses. While it is termed as a privilege of a woman to be driven for, it is her right to drive herself. It is about the right of a girl to have nutritional equality. She deserves that similar glass of milk her brother gets while growing up. It is for her right to be educated about her physiological changes and have easy access to personal hygiene products that are required by her biology. It is for these rights that they march – for the right to live as an equal human being.

It is not because they are Westernized. All sane humans know that with rights come responsibilities and branding the women of today as irresponsible is extremely unjust. A single parent woman bringing up her child all alone is a human being worth a salute. It needs to be understood that the struggle of women is not about freedom from social bonds or social responsibilities but the struggle to be treated as equal humans. Furthermore, generalizing biological strength over all aspects is intellectual dishonesty.

Indeed, there are gender roles, but they are set by biology not by society. A society that is unjust is more likely to set roles as suit the beneficiaries of the arrangement rather than setting them equitably. Men have been setting these roles since eons, and thinking that they would set them justly now is simply too big a demand. Perpetuity of injustice in the name of order creates oppression and this makes it unjustifiable.

There are sections within society who argue that women already have rights under the constitution – so what are they marching for? Such people forget that in a society where even the right to be born is taken away from some based on their gender, rights need to be agitated for. Religion had since ages granted women a right to inheritance. Ask the women though, and barring a very small proportion, you’d know that their inheritance was either coerced away from them by way of a gift or not given justly. Religion didn’t discriminate on education but society is a reflection of the opposite. When resources are limited, how many offer a better education to their boys over girls? How many give the right to marry by choice to their boys as well as their girls? A dishonest society that fears arguments pins its behavior to its biased view of religion. We do the same. Although if religion had a voice, in this case it would have said ‘Not in my name’.

Have we been guilty of such injustices in our lives so far? We must all ask this question of ourselves. If we have not been a part of this discrimination, we are among the lucky few who have not been oppressors. It is time to correct the mistakes of the past if possible and stand with those who are raising their voice for not any privilege but for their rights, not just in the Aurat March but beyond in their continuing struggle for a just society.

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