**When women wonder**

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‘Power’ seems to contain infinite possibilities and prospects of varying degrees as well as implied guarantees of wealth and influence.

It is a word that has had an interesting trajectory of comprehensibility when it comes to our understanding of it. In most South Asian communities where children are encouraged to watch animated cartoons and shows that are in the English language due to the deep-rooted impacts of internalized colonialism, the introduction to the concept of power is through hyperbolized, physical depictions of force.

These children watch in awe as animated characters hoist boulders on their shoulders in order to eliminate antagonistic elements. Throughout the years, however, different experiences have allowed for the definition of the term to transcend purely corporeal connotations to a more refined, nuanced approach.

The realization that power can be present in the most subliminal of forms and the most ordinary of human conducts is a gradual process. Power is the influence that a customer can have on a vendor. It is the influence held by those in power that compels the seller to adopt softness in tone, submissiveness in demeanor that allows for their products to be sold.

Power also resides in my choice to go to the market in the evening, despite knowing that it is an unsaid rule for women to not venture out so late. In our sphere of the world, when the sun sets, so does a woman’s space in society.

Pakistan ranks second to last in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2022, surpassing only Afghanistan. In the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex, Pakistan maintains its rank at 145 out of the 146 countries. Women only account for an underwhelming 22.63 per cent of the labour force.

Interestingly enough, out of the 5.26 million people working in the informal sector in the country, 81 per cent are women. The testimony to the fact that more women in the labour force would only add to its strength is that their contribution accounts for 65 per cent of the $2.8 billion that the informal economy brings to the country. However, much to the dismay of women laborers, they earn only $15-20 per month as a result of multifaceted disparities in the system, including poor protection, malnutrition, unsafe working practices and a lack of medical and wage benefits.

For a country that has been home to some of the most profoundly courageous and determined women politicians such as Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah and Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto – the latter being the first woman elected to head a democratic nation in a Muslim-majority country as well as the first to give birth while in office, – the political statistics should at least do justice to the sacrifices rendered by women for the country’s progress.

Unfortunately, as per UN Women’s calculations, gender parity in the national legislatures would not be achieved before 2063 at the current rate of progress, which is forty years away. Pakistan has been ranked as one of the top ten countries most impacted by climate change in the past two decades, recent natural catastrophes of which are a testament. Women who are already heckled by an influx of already-bleak circumstances become increasingly vulnerable to health problems as well as abuse, in climate catastrophes.

It is the plight of our nation that during the recent devastating floods that submerged one-third of the country, the argument of whether menstrual hygiene products come under the umbrella of essential items was a major topic of discussion as some considered them ‘luxury’ items.

The irony is not lost on us, as the increasing economic disparity in the country, the lack of women breadwinners and poor knowledge of reproductive health tend to make even the most basic necessities such as sanitary napkins a ‘luxury’ for most women, often leading households to making the choice between them and food or other seemingly imminent concerns.

These statistics and observations lead one towards the alienating corridors of rhetorical questioning in which one ponders whether the only commonality between women and power is that of the three mutual alphabets, all of which interestingly spell out ‘woe’ and ‘owe’, mimicking a self-fulfilling prophecy. The woes of a Pakistani woman and the reparations owed to her for the decades of criminal negligence towards prioritizing and curbing gender-based discrimination are directly proportional in nature.

It is important to realize that isolating men and women, or the latter alone, from society only amounts to treating the symptoms not the disease. While band-aid solutions such as creating exclusive spaces for women in society can allow for their gradual reintroduction to it, this approach lacks sustainability and sufficiency in the grand scheme of resolutions. These quick fixes need to be elevated to more proactive approaches. These could include, but are not limited to, introducing elective subjects at secondary education institutes that revolve around the themes of gender parity and similar motifs but most importantly, human rights.

Our solutions need to evolve and grow from being limited to telephonic hotlines and constituting organizational bodies to report harassment and abuse to accelerating the paces at which these cases are heard, ensuring the conviction of those responsible as well as constituting a special court that is designed to provide justice over a reduced time period.

It is hoped that our honourable courts that already seem extremely concerned about setting examples in cases regarding constitutional and political matters will extend the same degree of sagacity to cases of sexual harassment and abuse, domestic violence, gender-based discrimination at workplaces or elsewhere, honour killings and cyber bullying.

When a woman wonders, sitting on a bench in the capital of the country, she does so about how long till the sun sets and so does her hope of ever returning home safely. When a woman is stopped from attaining higher education, she wonders about the bigotry sown in society’s fabric, where ‘respectable’ families demand female doctors to tend to their patients.

When she is driving on the motorway constructed from the taxes she has paid, she wonders how many gallons of fuel one should stock up in order to evade an unwanted encounter. When she sees a Pink Bus in only one of the four provinces in the country and breathes a sigh of relief, she wonders why the white, blue, green and a plethora of other brightly-coloured transport vehicles could never evoke the same response.

When the young mind of the new Pakistani woman wonders from now, the parameters of her thoughts are not to be defined by the age-old shackles of having her basic rights be met but by the limitless horizons of hope, change and power.

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