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March 4, 2021

**Women and a safe space**

A couple of weeks ago, for an organizing meeting concerning the upcoming Aurat March “womxn, trans-folks and non-binary individuals” were invited to join. What stood out in the announcement was “No cishet men allowed”. A tweet the following day further clarified this as being an organizing meeting and that “Men are always welcome at the march; their support is crucial to our larger mission”.

This is totally the organizing committee’s call to make. We all know how vilified the Aurat March and its organizers have been since its inception in Pakistan. But such actions raise a question that has very much been part of the fabric of how to develop and normalize gender equality in countries like Pakistan.

Will safe spaces for women and others ever include men?

As someone who has worked in this area for over two decades, this question haunts all of us who want to see everyone, of all orientations, rub shoulders together in the same public (and private) spaces – safely and equitably.

But decades on, actions such as this show that we are nowhere near any form of equality given we are all under threat from each other. A threat which is increasing instead of decreasing. In an ideal world, dis-cluding one group while including others isn’t a sustainable form of inclusionary human rights. But Pakistan is far from ideal, where bodies – especially female bodies – are not our own. Forcibly separating the threat, whether physical or otherwise, is at times the only way to gain any sort of public space, our safety being paramount.

Pakistan has repeatedly addressed the issue of safe spaces for women through its notion of ‘families only’ spaces. Many public parks have been designated as such, where single men or groups of only men are not permitted. The idea is to allow women and children a place away from prying eyes, something men in Pakistan excel at. Much to the ire of many men though. The same has been a tradition in many restaurants which have ‘family rooms’ reserved for – you guessed it.

This approach has its pros and cons. On the one hand, in a society where so little is accessible to women, the idea that they too can have the ability to enjoy open spaces, albeit under the shadow of their ‘families’, should not be opposed, even if it isn’t an equitable approach.

On the other hand, it perpetuates the notion that women have to be ‘protected’ from single men who are pariahs, totally negating the fact that pariah’s dwell in families as well. So, the whole concept is a complete contradiction in terms.

This approach is also problematic because it questions our attitudes towards many literally man-made social constructs such as the idea of family. Why are two brothers, for instance, not seen as a ‘family’ but as two single men when entering a family-only space? Why are a heterosexual couple seen as a family when they may simply be friends, (or heaven forbid lovers)? Just the way the state has nauseatingly hypersexualized women, giving them no other form of identity, it has also hyper sanitized the family, rendering them both easily manipulated for vile ends.

Similarly, given that rape and sexual molestation of young girls and women has become a crisis of epic proportions in our country and that no space, public or private, is safe for them, selective separation, as the ‘families only’ policy is, may be the only way women and girls have some freedom in public spaces.

On the other hand, continued separation will never address the fact that we cannot live in a segregated society and in fear forever. Homophobia, xenophobia, sexism and misogyny cannot be resolved in the absence of the actual cause of the problem – conservative and psychologically perverted attitudes.

Likewise, many who oppose separation in public spaces do not realize what this freedom means to many women and girls, particularly those who belong to low-income or rural environments. How important elements like sunlight, or the necessity to be publicly mobile to earn a living is of the utmost importance for their health and well-being – and even with separation, they still face innumerable challenges of harassment and bodily harm. This makes even the contradictory family-only policy at least one option for them to escape their oppressive domestic environments in some small way.

But the other side of the coin is that if we continue with this approach, we risk falling into the hands of the religious and conservative lobbies, who insist that a woman’s place is only under the protection of men (or their families). As it is, they interpret the enforcement of such policies as women being the problem, and not men. This is how our society and state already respond to the rape and sodomy of women and children.

The Aurat March announcement that triggered this piece, to be fair, was meant to restrict the planning of the event to only those groups the March represents, rather than a concern for safety. But at some point, if we as women and other marginalized groups want to truly feel safe and equal in this society, we will have to come up with a way that moves beyond living in two parallel worlds in the same space. The real issue is not finding ‘safe spaces’, but finding common ground on why we all deserve to co-exist in the same spaces.

One can only hope that this year, the Aurat March is more than just a safe space for women and that the single men who do choose to attend, think about their role in equalizing society, instead of terrorizing it.

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