

STATUS OF WOMEN IN SINDH

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Status of Women in Sindh has been discussed alongside a methodical analysis of the present situation. This paper gives an in-depth analysis into the nature of the topic, discusses social position of women in contemporary society, puts light upon religion perspective as well as socio-cultural background, elaborates prevailing issues in Sindh that women face such as honor killings, rape, murder attempts, female infanticides, and so forth. Finally, an attempt has been made to analyze a case study in a thorough and detailed manner and also provide recommendations regarding the solution to this heinous practice.

Keywords: Inequality, discrimination, infanticide, honor, rights, violation, murder, literacy

INTRODUCTION

Women exist in numbers nearly equal to that of men. Ever since the advent of humanity women have been in miserable condition and have been suffering from unrelenting issues. Cultural differences, gender discrimination, religious differences, misunderstanding or misconception of teachings of Islam, economic differences, and so forth have substantially attributed to the deplorable condition of women in Sindh. We cannot deny the fact that our world has reached its advancements in all fields of life, yet this area remains a great

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predicament that is yet to be solved. A great many organizations have been working for women's rights to improve their status in a society, a lot of motivational speakers have been toiling hard to put forth their motivational words yet it brings no justice to the situation and thus situation still seems plummeting down, especially in the region of Sindh.

Sindh, being one of the four provinces of the country and the second largest province in Pakistan, is a land that shares quite a detailed history regarding its traditions, norms and social values. Since this land has a history that dates backs to ancient times, therefore most of the norms and traditions that are still followed there today are a result of its rather intriguing past. The people dwelling in Sindh share a very loving, generous and friendly nature. They welcome their guests with whole heartedness and are well-known for the value and respect they provide to their people. Their love for their land is unparalleled and bears no limits as they would be willing to do anything for their land and honor. Although when it comes to women, as stated earlier, certain norms and values have been so deeply entrenched in our society that a great amount of disparity can be discerned on this land between two genders. The basic and fundamental custom that is practiced in Sindh is that of Patriarchy. Patriarchy, in laymen terms, is a custom related to having a societal system that encourages male dominance in society, and that male figure or figures of the family act as authority and have all the rights to make decisions, not only their own and that of the family but also the decisions related to the women who are a part of that family.

Due to these customs women share a very low independence in all respects of life and are exposed to a great deal of problems and social issues such as gender segregation, low self-esteem, no decision-making power, lack of freedom of choice or expression, and so forth. Men in the culture of Sindh think of women as being a critical feature of the family as women are believed to be the honor of a family, hence putting women in a very crucial and rather dangerous position. This also leads to the fact that whenever women behave defiantly to the customs, or raise their voice against the prevailing system, they are usually punished physically, either through acid throwing, burnings, beatings and even murdering, usually shrouded under the name of "honor."

The situation becomes worse when we take a glimpse at the rural Sindhi society, where certain practices such as “Karo Kaari” are so common that even the legal system of the country has not been successful in bringing end to it. This is mainly due to the feudal system that has long been a chief part of Sindhi culture. Women’s development faces a lot of impediment and hindrances due to other inevitable reasons such as low legal status, low political power, lack of will to change, and above all, lack of awareness. Most women, from the very beginning, accept their low power and lack of rights as a part of their life and admit to living with it due to being unaware of their actual rights. Hence they live their entire life oblivious to the fact that they bear any rights at all. All they know is that their purpose of life is to produce babies, be productive for the home in running errands such as cooking, cleaning, washing, feeding, and so forth. Women’s role, particularly in agriculture sector, is very tough as they work most of the day on lands, fetching water to and fro, as well as serving their own home and children by feeding them on time and keeping up with other regular duties simultaneously.

Social position

Sindh is a place where statistics for maternal mortality, violence against women, acid throwing and other related crimes are very high. On the other end of the spectrum, literacy rate, labor force participation, sex ratio are too low. Male members of the society often look at their females in their families with an air of suspicion and mistrust, especially their better halves, because honor and social status is what they value the most. If a man tries to maintain a conversation or contact with another woman, this is usually considered inappropriate in the culture and the man is never held culpable as woman is considered the one at mistake here, irrelevant of the fact that whether she made a mistake or not, she is always held accountable. This also puts women into a more perilous position as she is too prone to being blamed for mistakes that she never committed. As mentioned earlier, men also have an upper hand in misusing women as the spectrum of laws is very limited for women and offers them more negligence than rights of security, hence enabling men to take better advantage of the women, such as getting an old man married to a young woman or a young boy to an old woman, only for the purposes of possession of lands and properties.

We dwell in a society that is greatly influenced by stereotypical mindset. Due to such a stubborn mindset that doesn't allow any flexibility for women, situation simply cannot be improved and women would still remain as potential targets and victims in contemporary society. This also impedes any possible reforms that could be made because such people never give in to change and prefer to remain with older principles and customs that their ancestors have taught them. Factors such as male dominant societies, that is commonly known as patriarchy, is one of the main reasons why women have been devalued and disgraced greatly. This disgrace goes further in forms of sexual abuse, harassment, rape, lower status, no legal rights, and other forms of unjust treatment. These crimes mentioned above are so common that they have become a part of our society, even today.

The society in which we preside is an Islamic society, but paradoxically its practices, norms as well as stereotypes of women are in direct contradiction to religious views and practices. It is the discrimination between religious terms and cultural stereotypes that causes mass confusion as religion has described very clearly the position of women in a society, which is that of a very respectable figure, even to the limit that in Islam a daughter is considered to be equal to the value of 7 Qur'ans (Yusuf, 2009). This amazing comparison is more than enough to signify the fact that women are, irrefutably, the most important part of any family or society. But as per the practices in Sindh, women are treated in an entirely different manner.

Societal injustice for women is so widespread that it reminds me of a documented story of a girl named Meeran from Khosa Goth, which is a village in Kandiyaro and Darbelo located in the district of Naushehro Feroz (Dawood, 2009). She is about thirteen years old, very thin, has her head covered just as per the traditions of women. She said in a very earnest tone as to what is the importance of her body? What is the value of it? Is it beautified with diamonds and pearls? My father and brother would prefer to have me work in fields while they follow me and keep an eye on me like guards at all times in a manner that is aggressive and angry. If they really are so suspicious about us then why do they even leave us for toiling hard in fields and drenching ourselves in sweat? Why do they not do this all by themselves? Her words contained an air of humiliation and anger. She continued with a story that a man named Karim Dada lived in a village nearby. When

she was little she used to play in his lap. Karim Dada is known well as well as respected in her family. One day Meeran was working alone in the field and Karim Dada passed by. Requesting for assistance, she asked Karim Dada, the man of the age of her father, to help her lift these crates and put them on her head. Karim Dada, in turn, respected her request, helped her with the crates and later on said to her that you shall not speak to me as your brothers bear no mercy. People here would suspect something else when I would put crates on your head as it would lead to a danger for both of us. Upon hearing this, Meeran said to herself that she can't even speak to men who are aged as much as her parents?

Religious and Socio-cultural Background

In our society religious teachings are often manipulated and misinterpreted so as to have an edge over women in terms of rights and status. Take into consideration the example of Muslim countries where teachings of Islam are steered into direction that favor men over women in almost all respects of life, but ground reality is far different than what Qur'an and Hadith teaches. There are welter of stories and incidents related to unhealthy attitude and degrading manner of men against women in newspapers and television news. Lack of awareness is also another factor that is responsible for the violation of women's rights. Most advanced countries such as America also suffer from this disease as most women, particularly residing in Sindh, have low or no awareness of their rights and understanding of law.

A great portion of population of Sindh particularly resides in rural areas. In addition to this, religious norms and practices are practiced more and are valued highly in these rural areas. This is why most of the traditions have been derived out of the religion, but often under misconceptions. Islam provides fundamental principles of life, true art of living, distribution of rights, and forms the basis for the living for Muslims (Baloch, 1965). Islam influences all aspects of life of these people such as customs and traditions related to marriages, education, celebration of festivals, holidays, etc. That is why women have been treated in accordance with the nature of customs and teachings offered by Islam as well as the society.

Islam has indeed posed certain limitations upon the women and those can be categorized into two categories. The first one includes the inequalities of gender as well as legal restrictions that are imposed

upon women through various Islamic sources such as Qur'an, Shariah laws (laws propounded by Muslim jurists, Qur'an and hadith), Sunnah and Hadiths. These laws and legal restrictions include laws of marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance laws as well as the ability to serve as a legal witness. Another category of restrictions belongs to the seclusion or hiding of woman's physical appearance from a man who is not considered her Mehram (the one whom, according to laws of Islam, cannot be married to). As mentioned above, these two are the broad categories of restrictions imposed upon women that greatly hinder their ability to participate in myriad of events and practices such as receiving education, dealing with social, political as well as economic activities, and so forth.

As there are restrictions upon women in the religion, on the opposite end Islam also has laws that enhance and show the invaluable position of women in the religion. Before the advent of Islam women possessed no legal status. A woman was treated as a possession, hence sold, inherited and bought for wrongful purposes. They bore no right to take an active part in any socio-economic or political affairs, even to the limit that their personal choice was never given any consideration or concern. The birth of a baby daughter would be frowned upon rather than celebrated, and it would be called as a great disgrace or humiliation to the family. Apart from this another reason why women were thought of so lowly is that during that era men were in demand as tribal feuds wanted men who could guard and protect hence the birth of a daughter was not in their vested interest. Right after the ascent of Islamic traditions women received their due rights and position in a society by eliminating the ghastly practice of female infanticide and provided women with the birthrights. Indisputably, Islam does mark women as being inferior to men but this belief doesn't altogether nullify the value of women in our system. Since a man is blessed by nature with qualities of authority, power and dominance, he is inherently considered to be a superior being as the man is considered active while a woman, passive (A'La, 1987). In certain aspects of life, Islam guarantees equal rights to women such as economic independences, human status, dignity, as well as the right to take part in social life, work outside the home as well as receive education (Muhammad, 1980).

The reflections of religious laws and teachings can be easily discerned in the socio-cultural aspect of the life of people in Sindh. When a child

is born, he is trained in a manner so as to make him dominant part of the family who can not only protect the interests of his family but also maintain its good name. He has been taught from the very beginning that he is responsible for his family and that he is an emblem of power and status. This over exaggeration of rights and power to men in this culture also provides an explanation of the fact that women are treated so harshly and without much concern or appreciation. Son on the other hand is also considered as the permanent asset of the family, while on the other hand a daughter is simply considered to be someone whose stay is temporary in the family and that she has to leave someday. It is a firm belief in this society that 'a female belongs to another future husband' (Akbar, 1986). This also rules out much of the affection in the way of bringing up daughters as these are the deeply entrenched beliefs of the people of Sindh. Though the Islamic teachings direct us to appreciate the existence of women, but from the social perspective, these teachings are just not followed. It can also be said that Islamic teachings are neither followed completely nor are altogether ignored, hence the culture that we see in Sindh is a blend of local cultures and Islamic culture (Damodar, 1972).

Problems

The situation of women living in Sindh is quite deplorable as they suffer from a multitude of problems and dilemmas. Women in Sindh have been suffering from a great many miserable practices for a very long time and have always been a prime target of society. If there were to be written thousands of pages regarding the grievances that women have in this region, even then they can't be completely accounted for. Although the problems prevalent in Sindh that women face are countless, some of them are major ones such as female infanticide, violence, honor killing, rape, lack of legal rights, education, and so forth. Some of the major problems are discussed herein.

Female Infanticide

Female infanticide is actually the killing of a baby girl, done advertently, as a result of giving more preference or value to a male baby. Neglect of a baby is very widespread and common in Sindh, especially in rural areas. This trend is a very old one that has been in tradition for more than decades. Whenever a baby is born in this region, it is seen as a sign of dishonor for the family and in most cases male members simply prefer the death of a baby girl rather than her

upbringing. This custom is very much similar to that of the practice in pre-Islamic Arab society where baby girls, when born, would be buried alive, because they were seen as a social disgrace (Hanif, 2011). Arabs during that era had a strong belief that a woman's dispatch or a daughter's dispatch is rather an act of kindness. In addition to this they had another surprising and shocking belief that burying their daughters alive was a noble deed. The same can be witnessed here as whenever a baby girl is born her father would become angry at her birth rather than consider it as a blessing of Almighty Allah. The practice of female infanticide is in direct contradiction to the Islamic teachings as the Qur'an, at no any place, signifies that a woman is of lower value or that she holds a lower standard. In addition to this, every human has a birth right and taking away their birth right is against the impeccable teachings of our religion Islam. Even the very thought of being disappointed at the birth of a baby girl has been greatly detested in Islam. It has been made clearer in Qur'an. In Surah al-Nahl, 58-59, in which God says that their faces become filled with sadness and grief when a female child is brought to them. Such men hide themselves from others because of this news which they think is evil, and they bury them in the earth as this is their decision to get rid of dishonor, hence Qur'an dictates the fact and shows abhorrence for such people who bear no respect for baby girls and this is one of the problems which are on the rise in rural areas of Sindh.

Honor Killing

Human Rights Watch defines honor killing is defined as the act of vengeance in the shape of death, usually committed by male members of the family against the female members who are alleged to have brought disgrace to the name of the family. A woman can be targeted for various reasons, some of the include refusal to having an arrange marriage, affair with another person, dishonor of the laws of culture, being the sexual victim, committing adultery, seeking a divorce, and so forth, hence the perception that the woman's behavior, whether she did it advertently or inadvertently, caused dishonor to her family is enough to launch an attack against her life. In other words, it can also be defined as an act of killing a woman when she resorts to illicit relationship with any person, ultimately damaging the honor of the family, tribe or the community she belongs to.

The most horrific of all, honor killing is the act of homicide pervading our society usually as a result of dishonor due to allegations such as adultery and premarital sex, refusal to arrange marriages, rape, and so forth. In laymen terms Honor Killing is coined as “Karo Kari”, which is a Sindhi term translated in English as “Black Black”. This term gives an insight into the figurative explanation of this practice from the word “Black” being used for both the alleged persons in the act who are accused as the ones to bring about dishonor upon the family. Honor Killing takes place as a result of confirmed or suspicion of a guilty or culpable behavior of women and in most cases killer is the girl’s father, brother or any other male member of the family or tribe. Both the girl or woman and her alleged lover are killed so as to restore the honor to the dishonored family. Honor killing or Karo Kari is an act that has been in practice since ages in our society, particularly in the province of Balochistan and Sindh. History is rife with the countless cases of honor killing and moreover, more than 20,000 women are killed every year worldwide as a result of honor killing (Fisk, 2010).

Honor killing is practiced throughout the world, particularly in those societies and families whose backgrounds relate to strict cultural, social and religious laws. Our society is one such example of it. Although it may seem that the Pakistani society is moving forward, westernization is spreading; people are becoming broad-minded in terms of the fact that they’re changing their culture and lifestyle with changing environment and advancements in the world, yet rural areas of the country, particularly that of Sindh, are still the active volcanoes of honor killing in Pakistan. As time goes on, this intensity of this act doesn’t seem to dwindle but rather gains pace in the face of the present society. Honor killing presents a serious blow to the status of women as it describes the miserable situation of our society where women’s lives are not given any worth.

Violence Against Women

Violence against women, commonly referred to as VAW, is not as worse as honor killing but still poses a great threat to the women in society. The reason of mentioning it as a separate issue than honor killing is that violence including rape, beatings, suicides, matrimonial disputes, marriage issues, tribal conflicts, lust for sex, old enmity, murder attempts, custodial violence, customary practices, domestic violence, abduction/kidnappings, trafficking, torture etc is on the rise in

Sindh. Several organizations have been working to the best of their ability to make things better and bring order to the situation. According to statistics, there has been a substantial improvement in this aspect as Aurat foundation, which is a foundation working for the welfare of women and their rights, reported that in the second half of 2010, number of cases shrunk down from 940 to 862 (940 being the number of cases in the first half of 2010). This decrease in number of cases and flourishing condition in this aspect can be attributed to the efforts of these organizations which are taking steps towards betterment of women and securing their rights.

Lack of Education & Legal Literacy

Deeply rooted mindset and old beliefs of people especially in rural areas of Sindh are the facts responsible for low literacy rate of women in Sindh. They possess very limited legal position and rights to participate in many areas of life. Legal literacy and education are the right tools that women should have in order to recover their position in a society and claim the rights that they own. Having no awareness of rights would put them in a position where men could easily make the best use of them and women won't even be able to save themselves without awareness of their legal rights and power. Until and unless people as well as NGOs force governments to act upon the stagnant proposals they offer, no change can be brought about, hence we should all raise our voice in favor of women's rights as it will provide women with a platform to stand up with courage and fight for their rights.

Case Study

Here I'll attempt to analyze the contemporary situation and position of women in a society through a case study regarding a girl named Sarah, who is a friend to a teenage girl named Meeran (also mentioned in previous paragraphs). This is a case of honor killing which reflects light upon the crucial, weak, highly unreliable and risky situation of women in the province of Sindh. The story, as told by Meeran, is the story of a young girl named Sarah, who was murdered as Kari in case of honor killing. She told that she knew the girl very well and that she never ever looked at the face of those two boys who were the cause of her being 'Kari'. She continued with tears in her eyes that she and her friend were playing at home with dolls on the day when this murder happened. The girl's brother named Barkat came in and asked Meeran to prepare a cup of tea for him. When she went inside to make a cup of

tea, her father's brother's son named Umar came out with a pistol in his hand. Barkat also went in and took a pistol. Then they both went out. Meeran didn't suspect anything as possessing guns is a normal thing in rural areas. Sarah's mother called Fatima to help her out in cleaning wheat and Fatima at that time was washing clothes. All of a sudden they heard some gunshots nearby. Everyone in the home was terrified at the noise. Soon after that, Barkat and Umar came back inside. Sarah was already terrified at hearing the gunshots; she hid her face in the lap of her mother and her brother Barkat pushed her mother aside. Her mother fell down to her son's feet and asked him not to shoot her, but immediately Umar shot her dead. She died in front of her mother's eyes. Later on Umar and Barkat ran away while her mother talked incoherently in the grief of her daughter's death and suffered a serious emotional distress. A little girl nearby also got affected and shocked by hearing gunshots and turmoil and she couldn't even eat for days and got sick.

Having critically analyzed the story of Meeran's friend named Sarah, it takes me to the conclusion that women living in these regions lead their entire life in a very critical position. They are neither allowed to talk nor even look at another man, irrespective of what the intention may be. Rural people have such a low mentality and narrow-mindedness that it didn't bother those two merciless boys to kill their own sister. Now this is the status of women prevailing in our present society. Surprising fact is that Sarah never even looked at the person for whom she was alleged as "Kari". It is a shame to such a society where such practices take place so openly and in great numbers. Sarah's story is just one such sad incident in which she lost her life, a mother lost an innocent daughter, and fear prevailed over the society. What did anyone gain from it? What honor are they even talking about if the girl didn't even saw those persons and yet got killed? This unjust system is the result of a deeply rooted tribal mindset for which honor is the issue of life and death. Think for a moment if such a thing happened to any of us, what would our reaction be? Would our sisters allow such brothers to be a part of our families? Would we want to produce such mindsets in our society who, far from guarding the family, turn into the enemies and mean harm to them? Who would like to have such male members or such a societal system that sustains such criminal laws? Of course nobody. Women are devalued and looked at with such contempt and hatred which is beyond imagination of any rational human being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Women without the realization of their true strength, potential and rights, would not be able to face the threats, situations and problems of everyday life in our society. In addition to this religious misinterpretation, political manipulations and cultural stereotypes have further aggravated the situation. To bring about a change, beliefs related to chastity of women, should be weeded out as chastity is the fundamental root of all the problems women are exposed to. Government should collude their plans with non-governmental organizations as well as human rights' sector to work together for the same cause with dedication and commitment.

CONCLUSION

It is long before a radical change may be observed in a region that we dwell in. Past beliefs, customs and traditions have crippled our ability to think sensibly about the position of women. If we give it a deep thought, we would come down to the conclusion that women are of utmost importance in our lives, whether it be our social lives or professional. Success of a society and its ascent in all walks of life is only possible when gender equality is given consideration. Women's commitment, hard work, dedication and perseverance can be easily discerned in comparison to men, despite the fact that at the same time they remain as the main targets of injustice, illiteracy, limited opportunities, no legal rights, etc. Human rights worker named Sojourner Truth, made an incredible speech regarding the rights of women in which she made it clear to the world that women bear no lower status than that of men and that they are both equal. She strongly believed that women are powerful and capable creatures. If we come to acknowledge the real status of women, only then we would be able to have them realize their full potential which will ultimately not only be good for the families but also for Sindhi society as a whole.

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