

GROWING UP IN PAKISTAN

by Fauzia Rafiq



Photo: Brenda Cranney

L' article décrit ce que signifie devenir adulte pour une femme au Pakistan. L' article parle d' une société au sein de laquelle les femmes ne sont pas éduquées dans le but de devenir autonomes et de s' affirmer; d' une société qui n' encourage pas l' éducation des femmes et qui considère le mariage comme le but ultime de toute femme.

The study indicated that Pakistani culture is quite successful in indoctrination of their women. Whether it is taking the blame of an unhappy marriage or giving up her share in property or feeling herself a burden and a liability on parents. She knows that parents are not happy at the birth of a girl and she should not complain about parents not sending her to school as she is not expected to take up a job. She is taught to be patient, sacrificing, obedient and ready to take a secondary position as compared to men. If something goes wrong with her marriage she is expected to take the blame. If anyone of her children do not succeed in life, she is expected to be the main cause of their failure and in the rare circumstances that she seeks a divorce her chances of a second marriage are very slim because Pakistani culture believes in putting all the blame on one partner namely the weaker half. (Hassan)

This is the expectation most misogynist systems have of women. Mechanisms which have evolved to achieve it turn millions of potentially productive women into guilt-ridden, passive and non-creative persons. Pakistan is no exception. Growing up in Pakistan is actually a rigorous training program spanning over the childhood, adolescence, and youthful years of young women, making us the perfect victims of men in a misogynist, homophobic patriarchal system.

It is not easy for me to look back at myself and young women my age. It reminds me of the utter powerlessness, the confusion and the pain that was my youth.

I could not understand, for example, why my body was so sacred that I was prohibited from revealing any part of it to anyone, while men were grabbing at it (without my consent) on the roads, in the buses, in the bazaars, in my house.

I also could not understand why I was born so lacking. My mouth was too wide, lips too big, eyes too small, height too tall, body too skinny, breasts too meagre, hands too big, feet too small, nose too long. For a while, I thought it was only me. But when I connected with other young women at school and then at college, I realized that most of us were born lacking. The majority were not even close to the standard of beauty set for women by men. Most of us were made to feel helpless and ashamed of being born with serious 'physical deficiencies.'

I could not understand why no one listened to me even when I had something sensible and important to say. I could not understand why my brother would not allow me to study journalism in a co-ed university. I could not understand why I had to be married before I was eighteen.

I did not understand any of it because I was not supposed to. My only option was to contain my feelings of anger, outrage, powerlessness, and unhappiness and do what was asked of me.

What was asked of me? The same that was being asked of all of us. We were forced to believe in concepts, traditions and mannerisms that resulted in a depleted sense of self-worth around our femininity. We were told: your self-worth depends on physical appearance; no need to think about anything; do what is asked of you; learn to make yourselves invisible; power is with men, and that is that; and remember, few of you are good enough for men anyway.

This indoctrination created me, a woman still trying to regain what was lost in energy, self-esteem, and creativity in my youth. And I am not the only one. This indoctrination cuts across class, culture, language.

In most cases, the right to choose was taken away from us completely. The utter powerlessness that we experienced as young women makes it difficult to assert ourselves and soon, we also lose the will to do so.

Meanwhile, we are being asked to become what is required of us by a woman-abusing system: 'good girls'. The 'good girl' is unerringly presented as a beautiful but sacrificing young woman. This 'Eastern beauty' is allowed in the movies and videos to indulge in a pious love affair, the 'natural motive' of which is to get married since women and men are not allowed to have sexual intercourse without being lawfully married.

We grow up idolizing an image of a woman ready to be used and abused by men. This is what is asked of us. To become Muslim Barbie dolls. To lose the will to protect our right to choose. Our education, career, marriage, sexuality, self-worth and identity, all are determined by someone else.

Education

The female population of Pakistan, in the age group of ten and above, is 25.8 million. 18.3 million women live in rural areas. Young women and women-children alone could be 17.6 million. The majority of young women might be found doing household chores or working in the fields in almost all rural households excepting the landowners'. A small percentage of young women in urban areas might be going to schools or colleges or working for money. The majority of urban women might be confined in homes.

The parents of all young women are sitting tight, making dowries and waiting for suitable suitors. Deviations are few, capitulation abundant.

Educating women is certainly not the order of the day as far as the majority of the population is concerned. Reportedly, 6.3 million young women in the age bracket of five to nine years have an illiteracy rate of just over 50 per cent. Then comes the age group of ten to fourteen, where 75.7 per cent of the 4.8 million young women are branded as "illiterate." The illiteracy rate in 15 to 19 year old girls is 75.6 per cent of the 3.5 million. Then comes young women of 20 to 24 years: out of a total of 3.0 million about 79.8 per cent are termed illiterate. (The Report of the Working Group on Women's Development Programmes for the Sixth Plan 64-65)

The concept of "illiteracy" is of course defined according to the convenience of the system. Most "illiterate" young women in rural and urban areas know how to read the *Quran* in Arabic, the only 'education' deemed necessary to our role. The system requires us to read the *Quran* in Arabic, learn our prayers in Arabic, and develop the ability to count a little, just enough to keep track of part of the household budget.

In this 'compulsory educational programme', the *Quran* is learned by rote. The object is not to teach a language, but only the alphabet necessary to read the *Quran*. Which means we have basic skills to read, but these skills are never applied to overcome illiteracy. For instance, Urdu, the so-called national language, as well as all major regional languages of the country, are in the same linguistic script as Arabic. If there was a little incentive or a recognition of some need for literacy in our social role, it would be easy for us to learn to read and write any of the commonly used languages in Pakistan.

Since the qualification for marriage in this economic class is the capability to read the *Quran* by rote and say our prayers in Arabic, there is no need and no incentive for young rural women to learn to read and write.

In cities, the qualifications for marriage have slightly changed. The urban poor and lower middle class families, having recently migrated from rural areas, are mostly bringing up their first

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generations in the cities. These families are forced to recognize the need to educate their daughters because it is indeed difficult to rear a family through the efforts of one person alone. Underprivileged families are forced to make a living through the paid labour of both women and men.

An "illiterate" woman can work only as a maid servant or as an unskilled labourer; the salary of either of these jobs is in the range of Rs.50 to 300 per month (roughly \$3.50 to \$21 Canadian per month). Women who have even a primary level education can get a menial job in a hospital, a medicine factory, a cosmetic factory or a ready made clothing company. In these places, the salary will start from Rs.400 to 500 per month (\$28 to \$35 Canadian per month).

For women born in underprivileged families in cities, it is desirable to have at least a primary level education because in that marriage market, economic need enhances the value of a young woman who could increase the family income.

The lower middle class, always on the fringes of poverty, is forced to let young women work, except that this stratum of the population suffers more because of its moral pretensions. A lower middle class family would educate daughters to primary or even matriculation level, or train them for a profession like nursing, but they do not want the woman to take a job unless forced to by economic reality. They try their best to hide it, unless it is a 'respectable' job like teaching in a girls' school.

The concept that a young woman working must be destitute causes the woman to take no pride in her paid work. She, even when working, is not allowed to feel good about herself or to feel the dignity of a human being who has the capacity to fend for herself.

Middle class families dis-

play two different attitudes towards their daughters. On one hand, most women lawyers, teachers, professors, doctors, painters and designers now working in the country have come from middle class families. On the other hand, it is this very class which displays some of the most primitive attitudes towards their young women.

It is observed by the author that a small section of the middle class, comprising self-made men working in government service, are the most flexible regarding their daughters' education and careers. This factor is common to all four provinces. For example, the first woman to qualify for the CSS (Central Superior Services) from the NWFP comes from a middle class Hazara family. Members of this same family settled in Baluchistan and

have two practising doctors out of three. One of the three sisters is a doctor, another is becoming one and the eldest is a graduate. The very first group of female lawyers in Sind also belong to Sindhi middle class families.

Though a very small percentage of the total population, these families show a trend that is heartening because, here, education or career opportunity for young women is not entirely subjugated to the demands of the mainstream marriage market. Some consciousness of a changing role for women is apparent.

On the other hand, a large section of the middle class urban families prove to be viciously against this changing concept of the role of women. They prefer daughters to be married in their first year of college. Educating daughters even this much is

entirely in line with the existing demands of the marriage market in their social strata. A virgin in her teens coming from well-to-do urbanized family is very much in demand as a prospective daughter-in-law. She can speak English, knows the middle class vogue in dress and jewellery, can display relative originality in the interior decoration of her house and brings a house full of dowry. Since she is so young and innocent in appearance, she is thought to be a lesser threat to the power of the man's family as compared to a well-educated, career-oriented woman.

A man aged 40 who 'made it', so to speak, into the 'higher' end of middle class by establishing an industry of sorts, married a 15 year old daughter of a declining landowning family. When interviewed, he said, and I quote: "the 'pieces' that are good enough are taken by the time they reach their 16th year. Lesser ones go by 18th year. Whatever is left is garbage."

This is a commonly held

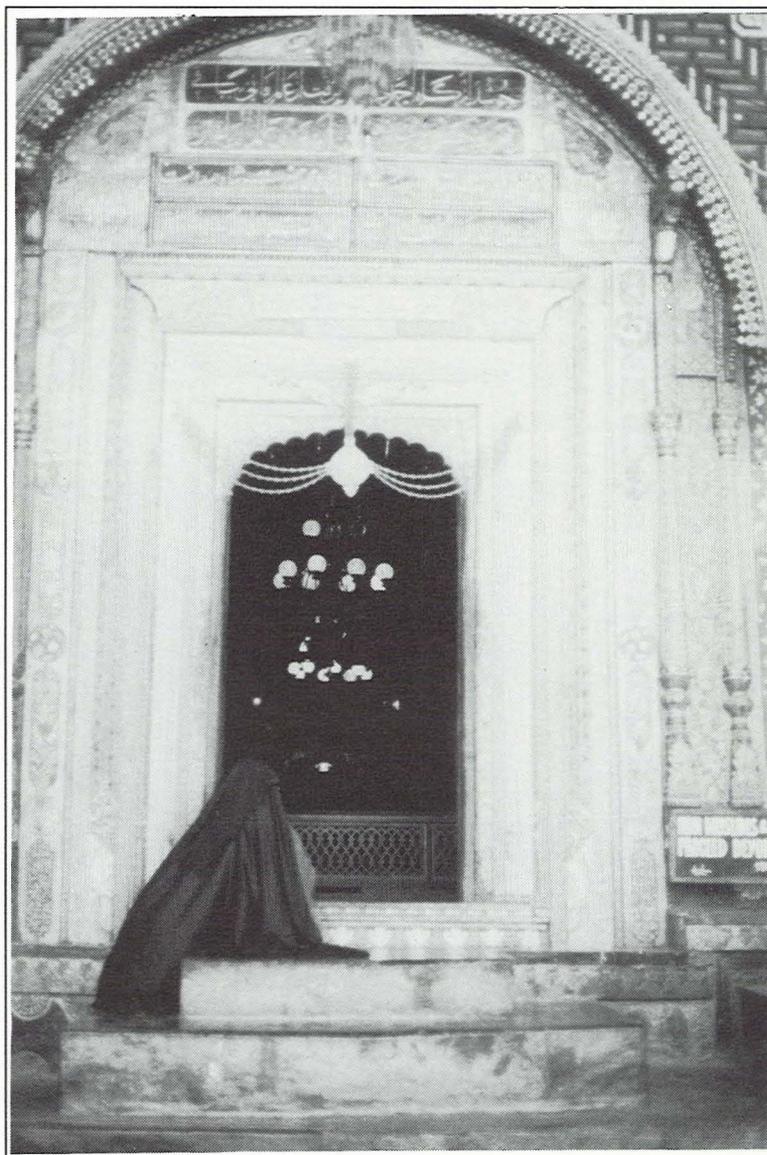


Photo: Brenda Cranney

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attitude of a large section of the Pakistani population. If he could have coined it with more precision, it would become an axiom.

Since we are also part of this society, we are obliged to comprehend the market value of our youth and physical beauty. Few of us have ambitions of studying further or adopting a career, since achieving that might put us into the garbage lot of the market. Even a clearance sale might not help us there. So, most of us are obliged not to comprehend the vulgarity of the notion. And how can one? Remember, from the time of birth we are told that our value lies only in a sturdy cunt and a pair of good-sized breasts. Everything else, apart from property and wealth, is irrelevant.

The other section of the elite—the Vaderas of Sind, Land-owners of the Punjab and Sardars of NWFP and Baluchistan—send their daughters to convent schools enabling them to learn manners, speak English, and become presentable. Now they can attract families of equal status for marriage. Their attitude towards their daughters is absolutely parochial and feudal in its values. Unlike their economic counterparts in industry and trading, it is much more difficult, even impossible, for their daughters to break away from the imposed value system.

What we get is not a priority on education for young women in any social strata (excepting a rather small section of the middle class), but an education subordinate to and dictated by the demands of the marriage market in the corresponding socio-economic class. The women are to become wives and mothers and nothing else.

Marriage

Young women are socialized to become housewives and mothers alone. The decision to choose our male partner rests with our elders; the decision to choose a female partner can result in deaths.

After reaching puberty, we are asked to appear in our best clothes in front of strange or known women hunting for a suitable wife for their sons. A few days

later we are told by the middle party whether we were accepted or rejected as a prospective wife of someone's son. Midhat, in her article "Is Your Face Your Fortune," says: "...a pretty face has a better market value than an ordinary one. Face, however, is not the only consideration in the human market. Plainness if compensated by material assets is readily accepted." (Latif)

She reaches the conclusion that:

... for a man economic security is nearly always a pre-requisite that dismisses any physical defect... a woman's position is a little more nebulous. Her appearance still carries more weight than her assets: and her physical charm remains a primary concern. (Latif)

Young women who are considered plain or ugly by the standards of beauty determined by the sexist milieu, have to go through a torturous process while appearing for selection as wives. This system of arranging marriages, which is a common practice in Pakistan, brings one point home: a woman, even if a valuable, intelligent person, is not worth marrying unless endowed with physical attractiveness. This concept looms large in our mental growth and psychological development.

For many girls it's not easy... sometimes, or most of the time, they become very touchy and emotional. For instance my sister-in-law's older sister... Many times it happened that she refused to appear before the guests, creating an emotional chaos in the house... The incident would then embarrass, haunt the family members for days, sparking guilt, helplessness and shame in parents, sisters and brothers. (Star 1 Nov. 1984)

Virginity

The virginity requirement ties in nicely with the institution of arranged marriage

and the preservation of a heterosexual environment in Pakistan. A young woman who has lost her virginity has little chance of getting married. This most important precondition of a respectable marriage bond is entrenched, forming the basis of early marriages. Young women ought to be pious, innocent, pretty, and virgin. Even now in the ritual of marriage, the Baluchi bridegroom might go with a dagger to the woman on her wedding night. He is given the right to kill the woman if she doesn't bleed at the time of intercourse. In other provinces, for example the Punjab, this duty is performed in a more "civilized" manner. The groom's mother, with other women, go into the room where intercourse has taken place and bring out the bloody sheets to prove to everyone in the family that the woman is indeed a virgin.

Violence against women

One cannot find a single day when newspapers in Pakistan have not reported a case of rape or abduction. Sexual abuse in the form of pinching, groping, and verbal abuse in bazaars, on the roads, and in public transport is so common that it is hardly ever reported.

According to government statistics, cases of kidnapping and abduction increased by 44 per cent (from 3181 in 1975 to 4,593 in 1982). It is called a 'nominal increase' in the total number of 'reported' crimes during an eight year period. (*Daily Dawn* 2 Aug. 1984)

These statistics show only the trend, never the extent of the violence. Normally the crimes committed against young women are vigorously hidden by the family. The woman is left with no place to go. In some Baluchi tribes, for example, such women are handed over to the Sardar to be abused and used by him; Pathans kill the woman (and the man); most Punjabi and Sindhi families hide it and try to arrange a marriage quickly. Consideration for the trauma of the survivor is almost non-existent.

In some cases where a family is willing to take a stand against the abuser, the

system protects the abuser through the police, justice system, and civil services. In Jhang, for example, a deaf mute young woman was sexually abused by influential men. The father of the survivor tried to register the case with the local police, going as far as the superintendent of the police, but the case was not registered.

The powerlessness of young women is apparent in some of the following 'reported' cases: a nine year old child was raped by a man in Mansehra (*Daily Muslim* 27 Nov. 1984); a bus driver kidnapped a young student in Faisalabad (*Daily Muslim* 1 Dec. 1984); a neighbour abducted a 12 year old woman-child after declaring her 'his sister' (*Star* 4 Nov. 1984); four police officers of Sialkot were found guilty of molesting young women passing outside the police station. (*Star* 13 Jan. 1985)

A 17 year old woman was abducted, raped and later arrested by the police, the court pronounced her guilty of un-lawful sexual intercourse and sent her to Rawalpindi jail. It took her a whole year of confinement to lose her mind. Two years later, she was still in jail and still without medical treatment. (*Daily Dawn* 23 Sept. 1984)

Women's movement

The women's movement in Pakistan is making inroads into protecting our right to choose. The struggle is harder because of the support provided by religion and religious leaders to the classist, sexist, and homophobic system. Support systems for women survivors are beginning to develop.¹ We have a long way to go to assure the dignity and self esteem of our young women, the most dependent, vulnerable, and powerless group of over 17 million young women and children.

Fauzia Rafiq is a Toronto writer originally from Pakistan. She is active in the community developing resources for women of

colour around the issues of violence and racism. She is a member of the editorial collective of DIVA and is currently working on a collection of short fiction. This article is based on a chapter from Fauzia's unpublished book Beneath the Crescent.

¹ ROSHNI Centre For Women in Islamabad is the first centre offering counselling, therapy, and medical treatment to women survivors of physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse. See *DIVA: Quarterly Journal Of South Asian Women*. 3.3 (Sept-Dec.1992).

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