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PART 3 GENDER

3.6 Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed—Women of Pakistan

3.6.1 Introduction

In their commission to write about the ‘embryonic women’s movement’ in Pakistan, Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed (1987) develop an alternative strategy for making women visible. Their concern is not with an ethnographic account of the organisation and functioning of the women’s movement but an historical analysis of the genesis and evolution of the movement in relation to the socio-economic and political structures that serve to oppress women.

Mumtaz and Shaheed were an integral part of the women’s movement in Pakistan. For them it was important not only to raise some of the issues confronting the women’s movement but also to encourage other women to write on the women’s issue in order that a deeper understanding could be evolved. This aim to generate the basis for a deeper understanding led them to provide a broad social and political context in which to locate their account of the rise and activities of the Women’s Action Forum rather than simply document the short history of the organisation and their role in it.

3.6.2 History writing

In attempting to provide this wider context Mumtaz and Shaheed became aware that no record of the history of women’s struggles for their rights and their involvement in politics existed. This they had to piece together from ‘scattered facts and footnotes’. Their research draws on published academic sources and bibliographies (including, Ahmed, 1975; Burki, 1980; Epstein & Watts, 1981; Gardezi & Rashid, 1983; Syed, 1984; Jayawardena, 1986; Mathur, undated;); newspapers and periodicals; conference and other unpublished papers; constitutions, position papers and other documents of women’s groups; government publications; legal ordinances and orders; and articles of the Constitution of Pakistan. As such, they admit it is only the first reconstruction of the struggle.

In their reconstruction they acknowledge that they confronted only some of the issues facing the movement in Pakistan as their priority was to ‘inform and to record events which, from today’s perspective, appear important’ (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Clearly this is a historicist approach to history writing. The procedure is historicist in its reconstruction of the past from the perspective of the present. This is not a critical approach in itself. It becomes a critical approach if it does three things. First, it adopts a critical perspective (*Weltanschauung*) through which to generate an alternative history. Second, it addresses historical events as they relate to prevailing social practices and examines the extent to which prevailing structures are sustained through them. Third, in

analysing the relationship between history and structure it digs beneath the surface appearance to reveal the nature of oppressive mechanisms.

The procedure adopted by Mumtaz and Shaheed was to work from the general to the particular. They begin their report with a wide general political history of Pakistan from pre-independence through the Pakistan Movement, the establishment of the separate state of Pakistan, and the recent history up to the early 1980s. This general political history was refined in stages (subsequent chapters) addressing, ever more closely, the oppression of women. The second stage of this historical reconstruction involves the production of a general social historical profile of Pakistani women. The third stage looks specifically at the impact of British imperialism on Muslim women in the Indian sub-continent. The fourth stage deals with the gradual progress of women's rights in the new Pakistan up to the establishment of Zia's military dictatorship. Stage five concentrates on how the Islamicisation process during the Zia period affected women in general. The sixth stage addresses the establishment of the Women's Action Forum in response to this. Finally, two specific issues concerning the restrictions on women in the Zia period are examined more closely. These are the efforts to veil and seclude women and the systematic reduction of women's legal status.

The approach, then, is to start with a broad historical perspective that addresses the position of women and progressively focus down on specific issues. In this manner the issues are contextualised both historically and structurally. The particular impact of the Women's Action Forum can then be assessed as a historically specific institution. The study was shaped by two considerations: first, the concerns of the Women's Action Forum; second, the relevance of Islam.

3.6.3 Women's rights and the Islamicisation process

A fundamental question that their analysis needed to address was 'whether Islam's relevance to politics in general and women in particular was only temporary, created by an unelected authoritarian government seeking legitimacy through religion, or whether there was a deeper issue' (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. vii).

Conventional histories of Pakistan have focused on the relationship with India, the struggle for democracy and the friction between the centralised state and the provinces. The nature, role and use of Islam by political forces and its relationship to the women's struggle has not been the focus of attention and thus the authors had to reconstruct a history from an entirely different perspective.

Mumtaz and Shaheed show that the women's struggle has been intertwined with the nationalist struggle (at least until independence) and then with democratisation up to the mid-1970s. Only in the Zia period has there been an overt struggle with conservative forces of Islam. However, Islam has had a much longer impact on Muslim social and political life and is seen as running parallel to Muslim women's struggle in the sub-continent. Despite its lack of overt prominence in conventional histories, their research indicates that Islam has been a recurrent theme in the political awakening of Muslim Indians, both progressive and conservative, and has had a concomitant effect, which has not always been negative, on the women's struggle. Only since independence in 1947 has Islam been increasingly hijacked by reactionary forces. Ironically, the very people whose conservative interpretation of Islam led them to oppose the creation of Pakistan came to power in the Zia regime. This new conservative intelligentsia are alienated from the

earlier West-educated élite and instead of looking to indigenous cultural and historical roots have turned to religion. The result is that the only version of Islam that has flourished is 'conservative, bigoted and fanatical' and Pakistan seems to be 'in the grip of the unenlightened and the closed-minded'.

Indicative of their critical historicism is the way in which Mumtaz and Shaheed analyse the legislative changes that affected women's rights. They do not just provide an account of what appear, from a current perspective, to be important legal changes and judicial decisions but also investigate what impact these had in practice and how they were implemented given the socio-economic conditions of women's lives.

Mumtaz and Shaheed illustrate two important aspects of this. First, they explore the perspective adopted by Pakistani women in their campaign for greater rights. There has been, they argue, little overt conception of the women's struggle as being one against a patriarchal system. Women have tended to think of a gradual and natural evolution of their rights. This was a situation that seemed to be occurring in the nationalist struggle. However, the women who were active and who were affected by greater freedom in the nationalist struggle and then by greater restrictions in the Islamicisation process inaugurated by Zia in 1979, were urban upper-middle-class women in the main and the impact of the legislative gains had not filtered through to the majority of Pakistani women.

Second, the life experiences of Pakistani women did not match their changed legal status. Mumtaz and Shaheed show that the reality of the patriarchal system is such that the majority of women are entirely economically and socially dependent on men and, while they have more rights in theory, in practice they are unable to demand them for fear of 'reprisals'. The constraints on women imposed through *purdah* extend to both private and public spheres and are legitimated by a web of myths that bolster patriarchal power and undermine women's access to the basic means of production and thus to political power.

The legal changes and the patriarchal dependency have themselves been mediated by changes in the social infrastructure. Capitalisation of agricultural production, industrialisation, migrant labour, inflation, education and the emergence of new classes within Pakistan and the international effect of unequal development all have an impact on the position and participation of women in society, not least because 'economic imperatives in Pakistan are pushing an ever greater number of women onto the labour market'. The study takes into account these infrastructural developments as they have an impact on the entrenched patriarchal system.²⁹

Mumtaz and Shaheed addressed the impact of colonialisation. Again they might simply have recorded the role the British Raj played in 'liberating' women by logging the contributions made by the imperialists, such as the banning of *sati* and the promotion of women's education. However, like Liddle and Joshi (1986) (Section 3.7, below) they critically assessed the nature of the imperialist contribution and showed that, during British rule, women's legal status was little improved and that changes were made in the context of a colonial power concerned with its own self-interest and profitability. Promoting education served the dual purpose of propagating ideology and providing an administrative class to serve the needs of the empire. Legal changes were related to criminal law, revenues, land tenure and such areas that affected the economic concerns of the imperialists. Interpersonal relations, disposition of property, and so on, were left

untouched and in the hands of Muslim religious law. The only salient contribution of the British in this sphere was to act to deprive Muslim women of their right to inherit property by imposing Hindu custom. It was only in the last years of British rule, when after agitation from Muslim women, the Muslim Personal Law (1937) was passed which permitted Muslim women to inherit property, although not agricultural land.

In their examination of the reactionary interpretation of Islam as far as women's rights were concerned under the Zia dictatorship, Mumtaz and Shaheed again dug beneath the surface of appearances. The campaign extolling people to be more Islamic was, they showed, quite clearly skewed as the impact fell far more heavily and one-sidedly on women. Interpretations of the Qur'an were hypocritical and biased in favour of female subjugation. Suddenly the struggle for women's rights was pushed into a debate about Islam.

Instead of arguing that this shift represented the victory of conservative patriarchal forces *per se*, Mumtaz and Shaheed examined the political expediency involved in the Islamicisation process. At one level such expediency was to ensure support from conservative forces, and while some ordinances had grave repercussions, legal decisions neutralised them to some extent. At another level, the Zia government tried out policies by implementing them without and resolutions, edicts or written commands to try and see what kind of reaction would ensue. For example, women stopped being recruited to banks, which were all nationalised, for a year (1982-83) without any government directive being issued in writing. No explanation was offered and after protests by women the directive was withdrawn as mysteriously as it was issued.

3.6.4 Conclusion

In providing an account of the emergence of the Women's Action Forum, Mumtaz and Shaheed have adopted a feminist perspective that reconstructs history by looking at the concerns of women and, in so doing, is a critique of taken-for-granted sex-blind political history. This radically different perspective on conventional history is developed critically through the adoption of a totalistic perspective that links the specific history of the Women's Action Forum with the wider women's struggle. It focuses on the emergence of a patriarchal Islamic economic and political system and the impact that it has on women. They dig beneath the surface of, for example, government directives to show the differential impact on women. Patriarchal ideology is revealed in the Islamicisation process with its consequent material affect on women.

Their study has a praxiological element summed up by their analysis of the way forward for the women's movement. They argue that a shift has occurred in the women's movement of the mid-1980s in Pakistan with more emphasis on women's rights, a greater degree of militancy, and an 'increased consciousness of the need to mobilize greater numbers of women from all classes'. However, they argue that on the basis of their analysis, if the women's movement wants to replace patriarchy, rather than simply improve their lot within it (a tenuous aim as the Zia government has shown) then they need to recognize that patriarchy 'is not the only form of oppression it will have to fight against'. Patriarchy, they argue, has been absorbed into tribalism, feudalism and now capitalism and while it is possible to distinguish patriarchy in theory, in practice it is inseparable from these socio-economic systems and opposition to one implies opposition to the other. So the women's movement, while remaining autonomous, must not remain

forever isolated. Meanwhile, women must struggle as it is less burdensome than immobile silence.

²⁹ The authors admit that they do not develop the study of the infrastructural changes in great detail and to some extent undo their totalistic analysis by suggesting that they 'have a logic of their own' (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1986, p. 3), which modifications in patriarchal norms have followed