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Women's Action Forum (WAF)— Women's Activism and Politics in Pakistan

By Leena Z. Khan

"With chains of matrimony and modesty
You can shackle my feet
The fear will still haunt you
That crippled, unable to walk
I shall continue to think."

-Kishwar Naheed, contemporary Urdu poet

JUNE, 2001

KARACHI—Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, women have engaged in struggles for emancipation at various levels. The women's movement has undergone many phases, just as the political history of the country has witnessed various periods. For half of its existence, Pakistan has lived under military or quasi-military rule.

On July 5, 1977, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was arrested and martial law was imposed in a bloodless coup that put General Zia ul-Haq in power. General Zia's coup brought in the longest and harshest martial law period in Pakistan's history (1977-1988). With General Zia assuming power through martial law, he sought to legitimize his position by entering into an alliance with the Jamat-i-Islami (Jamat), one of the most right-wing religious forces in the country.

Immediately after the coup, General Zia launched a much-publicized Islamization campaign. Women suddenly became the main target of this campaign as a number of measures adversely affecting women were passed by the government between 1978 and 1981. The long-standing demand of the Jamat for a separate women's university was accepted by the military government. The government, under pressure from the Jamat, issued various directives to government offices, specifying what an 'Islamic' form of dress should be for men and women.¹ In 1980, the government decided to ban all women participants from spectator sports. In the continuing attempt to Islamize the country, the Women's Division of the Government circulated a questionnaire on the status of women. The recipients of the questionnaire were asked to give their opinions on the role of women in an Islamic society, the type of education women should receive, and what types of employment suited women in an Islamic context.²

On February 22, 1979 (the Prophet Mohammad's birthday), the first concrete

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¹ In 1980 the government issued the first of a series of directives ordering all women government employees to wear a chador over whatever else they were wearing, and cover their heads. The first women to be affected were female announcers on government-controlled television. Overnight, female announcers and newscasters were told that they could appear on the air only with their heads covered and in full-sleeved attire. In contrast, their male counterparts were instructed only to wear the national dress (*shalwar khameez*) on the air.

² *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed at p.73.

Pakistan's Political Dateline: The Evolution of Islam in Politics

1875 Sir Syed Ahmad Khan saw the problem of Indian Muslims as being one of a withdrawal from the economic and political spheres of life. He became concerned with lifting Muslims out of their isolated condition so that they could actively participate with the Hindus in India. Sir Syed believed that it was essential for the Muslim population to espouse modern education. He led a reform movement aiming at bringing Muslims into the mainstream of Indian politics and society, which resulted in the establishment of Aligarh University in 1875. Aligarh University was created to attract Muslim youth from all parts of India in order to impart modern education without ignoring Muslim culture. The trend initiated by Sir Syed was to evolve a socially progressive ethos which was also relevant for women. Among Sir Syed's followers were advocates of women's education, who demanded an enhanced status and role for them.

1906 The Muslim awareness created by Sir Syed led to the formation of the All-India Muslim League. It was Iqbal's vision that 'the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim state appears to be the final destiny of Muslims in India.'

1940-1947

The Pakistan Movement: Mohammad Ali Jinnah emerges as the leader of the All-India Muslim League. In his efforts to mobilize Indian Muslims, he did not only appeal to the Muslim males, but focused equally on women. Jinnah supported women's rights and deplored the oppression of women in his public speeches. As a symbolic gesture, he would take along his sister, Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, along with him wherever he went. Jinnah also encouraged the organization of women's wings of the Muslim League in every major city. Women responded with great fervor and enthusiasm and became active supporters of the movement for an independent Pakistan.

Post-Independence Developments:

At the time of independence, Pakistan's political and economic structures were ambivalent. The attempt by the succession elites to resolve the political and economic problems were complicated by the entry of an orthodox *ulema* (religious scholars) on the political scene shortly after independence. The *ulema*, which was by-passed and isolated during the Pakistan movement, now presented itself as a contender for power by using Islam for its political rationalization. This period witnessed the emergence of Islam in the political debate in Pakistan. This ethos would later on have an impact on women's position in society.

1947-1958 The Early Years

Jinnah's vision of a non-theocratic Pakistan and Liaquat Ali Khan's (first prime minister of Pakistan) aspirations for building a democratic political system were not viewed by the political elites as being contrary to Islam.

Democracy, free speech, freedom of conscience, emancipation for women and tolerance were considered to be Qur'anic principles and desirable for the new state. However, the new politicians emphasized Islamic principles, not Islamic law.

1956 While the orthodoxy was looked upon with disdain by the political leadership, nonetheless measures were taken to pacify the *maulvis* (preachers). For instance, Pakistan was declared an 'Islamic Republic' under the 1956 constitution and the *ulema* were given an advisory role in the legislature. However most of the *ulemas'* demands regarding the functioning of the Islamic Republic, such as excluding women from contesting or participating in elections, were ignored by the Constituent Assembly. Eventually the *ulema* accepted the constitution of 1956 as being Islamic.

1958-1969 Ayub Khan's period

The year 1958 marked the change of power from a civil to a military bureaucracy. General Muhammad Ayub Khan assumed power through a military coup, banned all political parties and abrogated the Constitution of Pakistan. General Ayub made use of Islam for political ends in the elections of 1965 when he condemned the presidential nomination of Jinnah's sister Fatima Jinnah as being un-Islamic on the grounds of her being a woman.

1968-1969 Yahya Khan's Period

Pakistan experiences a popular upheaval against the military regime. On March 26, 1969 General Ayub steps down and hands over power to General Muhammad Yahya Khan, Commander-in-Chief of the army, who promulgates martial law once again. Under Yahya Khan the 1962 Constitution is abrogated.

1969-1977 The Bhutto Era

Bhutto and his Pakistan People's Party assumed office as the head of state in 1972, however his political impact in Pakistan began with the anti-Ayub movements of 1969. Bhutto emerged as the leader of the down-trodden and oppressed during the anti-Ayub movement and fired people's imaginations with the slogan of 'Islamic Socialism.' He held out the promise of *roti, kapra* and *makan* (food, clothing and housing) for every Pakistani and promised every citizen the right to vote. His charisma mobilized hundreds of young people, intellectuals and women to become actively involved in his campaign. Women were being encouraged to participate in all aspects of political life. Bhutto's contribution was the Constitution of 1973, which for the first time in Pakistan's history, gave equal rights to men and women and provided for equal opportunities for all. It also prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, class or creed, and had most of the provisions of a secular and egalitarian document.

Over the years Bhutto became a victim of his own policies and the progressive and radical elements of

his party found itself out of place. In fact, Bhutto and the establishment came down with force on the radicals, who now found themselves persecuted. Over time the PPP was transformed into a party of feudal landlords.

1977-1988 General Zia ul-Haq

An anti-Bhutto movement ensued, culminating in his arrest on July 5, 1977, followed by the imposition of Zia ul-Haq's martial law. General Zia scheduled for elections to take place in March 1978. Instead, nine months later, he voiced his intentions to Islamize the penal code of Pakistan as a first step towards establishing a 'true' Islamic state. Islam was being used to justify the continuation of martial law and postponement of elections. Having assumed power without authority, the General looked for a means to justify his rule. General Zia found a right-winged political party, the Jamat-i-Islami, to support his military rule. The Jamat-i-Islami advocated an inferior status for women, and the total exclusion of women from any decision-making processes. General Zia's moves included orders for saying afternoon prayers in all offices and for women in government service to wear *chadors* (veils). Although these orders were not strictly enforced or followed, the overall climate of society was affected. Pakistan witnessed a rise of vigilante groups taking initiatives to prescribe the correct version of Islam.

1988-1999 The Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif years

On August 17, 1988, General Zia died in a crash of a military plane, the cause of which has never been

determined. On December 1, 1988 Benazir Bhutto was sworn in as prime minister, the first elected leader of a Muslim country. The years of 1989 and 1990 witnessed the worst ethnic and sectarian violence in the country's history between Sindhis, Pashtun and Mohajirs in Karachi. Four general elections were held between 1988 and 1997, and Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif alternate as Prime Minister.

1999 General Pervez Musharraf

The Sharif government is dismissed on corruption charges. Army Commander-in-Chief, General Pervez Musharraf takes over as Chief Executive. Viewed as a progressive thinker and moderate, General Musharraf has pledged to hold elections in August 2002. At numerous public events and television speeches, General Musharraf has stated that he hopes to move Pakistan away from right-winged Islamic extremism and has made numerous references to the vision of the Quaid-i-Azam. In recent months, General Musharraf became President. He has vowed to crack down on right winged religious organizations and sectarian religious groups through the passage of an anti-terrorism law. While women's groups welcomed General Musharraf's establishment of an independent and permanent commission of women's rights, they did so with reservations. There is serious question as to how 'independent' the commission really is. Women's groups have criticized the commission as being only an advisory body with no power to receive individual complaints or redress them, as the commission has no authority to enforce or implement its recommendations.

Continued from page 1

step towards Islamization was announced by the military government. The *Hudood* Ordinance was promulgated amid much fanfare. The Ordinance covered adultery, fornication, rape and prostitution, bearing false testimony, theft and drinking alcoholic beverages. It also made *zina* (extra-marital sex) an offense against the state.³

The part of the Ordinance most seriously affecting women was *zina*. It encompassed adultery, fornication and prostitution. For the crime of *zina* the maximum punishment, or *hadd*, is stoning to death for married persons and 100 lashes for unmarried persons. However the proof required for the *hadd* punishment is that there be four Muslim male adult eyewitnesses of good repute to the act, or a voluntary confession in a court of law. The confession can be retracted at any time before the execution of punishment, in which case it would not be carried out. With any other type of evidence, including the testimony of women or non-Muslims, the *hadd* punishment could not be carried out. The crime would then be punishable by *tazir* (any punishment lesser than *hadd*). In the case of

zina, the *tazir* has been defined as imprisonment for up to ten year, or a whipping of up to 30 stripes and/or a fine.⁴ The *Hudood* Ordinance had serious implications for women's rights, as it excluded the testimony of women altogether for *hadd*.⁵

Secondly, the Ordinance made no distinction between rape and adultery and required the same level of proof to prescribe *hadd*. This requirement has amounted to grave injustices in cases of rape, as it is most unlikely that anyone would commit rape in the presence of four Muslim witnesses of good repute. While it is possible for a rape to occur in the presence of four women, a woman's testimony is precluded altogether for *hadd*. Thus as the law stands, the rapist is protected, women and non-Muslims are prevented from testifying, and the issues of rape and adultery have been confused.

In 1981 a group of around 30 women was jolted into action by the Islamization process started by General Zia. By sharply focusing attention on gender issues, discrimination and the reversal of women's rights, this group gal-

³ Prior to the Hudood Ordinance, *zina* was an offense against the husband, not the state. Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed at p.100.

⁴ *ibid* at p.101.

⁵ The *Hudood Ordinance* has been criticized even from *Qur'anic* specifications, for the words of the *Qur'an* say: 'four believers from amongst you' and does not specify the gender of the witness.

Leena,

The map will go here.

vanized to form Pakistan's first feminist organization and women's rights lobby, *Khawateen Mahaz-e-Amal* or Women's Action Forum (WAF). WAF was intended to be a forum for both women and women's organizations who were raising serious concerns over the various measures being adopted in the name of Islam.

I recently met Anis Haroon, one of the founding members of WAF, and asked her how she became involved in activism. Anis, who is in her mid-fifties, was a product of the sixties. She has been involved in many movements — for peace, civil rights and at the beginning of the first feminist movement in Pakistan. In 1970, after completing her Master's and LLB at Karachi University she became a full-time journalist for *Akbar-I-Khawateen*, a women's magazine. Anis told me that in those days there was a lively culture of intellectual dissidence and protest in the country. As a student she was a part of the anti-Ayub Khan⁶ movement and joined a leftist student organization called the National Students Federation. It was while Anis was working for *Akbar-I-Khawateen* in the early 70s that the Pakistan People's Party was formed. She recalls: "we were all very enthusiastic about democracy. Bhutto⁷ was a charismatic leader. PPP won in a landslide victory. There was

energy in Pakistan at that time, new ideas were being set forth by the PPP, a readiness for change, political debates and activism, writers and poets were thriving, it was a great time to be an activist.

"Throughout our history women have been brought out on the streets in large numbers. They were encouraged to come out and struggle alongside men and take an active part in the movement. However, as soon as the movements achieved their short-term goals, women were pushed back into their homes on the pretext that women's roles should be within the domestic realm."

I found this statement intriguing and asked Anis how this played out for women on in the Pakistani political scene. "There are many examples in countries all over the world where women have been used as a reserve force" she explained. "This was particularly true of the movement for independence, which led to the partition of India and Pakistan, where the men of the Muslim league encouraged their women to join *jalsas*⁸ and organize rallies. Mostly the wives of the leaders were involved, who were given the ok signal that it was all right for women to come out now. In Peshawar on the eve of par-

⁶ In 1958 Martial Law was imposed in Pakistan under army Commander-in-Chief General Muhammad Ayub Khan, who took over as Head of State.

⁷ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

⁸ A *jalsa* falls somewhere in between a rally and a meeting, and involves a central topic and is marked by a certain amount of celebration. The components of WAF's *jalsas* were speeches, poems, theatrical skits, and songs.

tion, where women were living under tribal customs and law and who had never taken part in public activity, hundreds of women took part in the demonstrations.

“The biggest mobilization of women took place under MQM⁹, which was an ethnic-oriented movement, not one related to women’s empowerment,” she continued. “Once again women were encouraged to come out in large numbers, and they performed all the chores. The MQM movement was an extension of their ethnic identity. When it came to sharing power with women, it didn’t happen. The men’s response was that since women work in oppressed conditions it was not a good idea to involve them. The reality was that women had been involved in the MQM from the beginning, in clashes with police, and were taken to *thanas* (jails). When it was not safe for women to come out [an demonstrate], they even went to graveyards to bury the dead, something women have not customarily participated in” she explained. In this context, the act of performing burials was significant and could be interpreted as an act of defiance, since women were taking part in an activity normally carried out only by men.

When the struggle against Ayub Khan’s dictatorship in 1958 began, women were once again at the forefront. “Again and again you see in Pakistan, that whether it was a resistance movement for restoration of democracy in Ayub Khan’s days or later on, women have been part of all these struggles and movements. At that time numbers mattered. The forces who were opposing the establishment or who were opposing the state had to build pressure, and for that they need numbers.” Women were encouraged and told that it is their national duty to participate. But once that task was complete they were expected to go back to their domestic roles.

“No one wants the family system to be disturbed. If women are out constantly, and taking part in public life, then naturally their thinking and psyche is going to change. They’ll become empowered and begin to talk about their rights. It doesn’t suit people who believe in the status quo or who don’t want real change. The same thing happened in Algeria. The role women have played in Algeria is now a part of history. In Pakistan Begum Liaquat Ali Khan¹⁰ had formed the Muslim League’s National Guards — including women. At the time there was a threat of war with India over Kashmir. Later on the National Guards was disbanded on the pretext that women were not needed anymore.”

I later found out that APWA, created in 1949, was

not viewed as a threat and was fully endorsed by the government. However Begum Liaquat Ali’s initiative to set up the Pakistan Women’s National Guards in 1949 met with vehement opposition from conservative elements, especially the *maulvis* (Muslim preachers), who disapproved of women’s participation in military training. The National Guard was condemned as being too radical and a hot-bed of vice and immorality by some religious groups. It was disbanded in 1954.

Anis is still passionate about her work with WAF has found activism to be personally rewarding and fulfilling. While her husband, a professor of psychiatry, has been extremely supportive of her involvement in WAF, she feels that many women she knows are often limited in their capacities as activists. “Women with families want to succeed in both realms, family and activism. They find themselves in a compromising situation, and are often under great stress to prioritize the family over activism. The issue of multiple identities as wives and mothers often conflicts with their identities as feminists or activists. Many women I know feel a sense of guilt if they think that they have somehow been disloyal to their families.”

As we conversed in her office at the *Aurat Foundation*¹¹ Anis began to tell me about the political climate after General Zia’s military coup. “The rightist organization, *Jamaat-i-Islami* began collaborating with Zia ul-Haq soon after the military takeover. General Zia needed a political party for his own credibility. *Jamat-i-Islami* had a worldview, and still does. It sees a very limited role for women. It has its own agenda of total segregation and a special arena for women, different spheres for men and women, and [is on the traditional side of] the whole debate between the public and private spaces for women. General Zia introduced a dress code for women and all the teachers, making it mandatory for all government employees to wear a scarf. The biggest blow to women’s status came in 1979 when Zia brought in the laws of Islamization under the *Hudood Ordinances*.”

Very few organizations in Pakistan take a stand in favor of a secular state. WAF has been the most categorical about it and took a politically courageous position that women should struggle for a secular state. I asked Anis why WAF consciously chose to take a secular position in criticizing discriminatory legislation in what appeared to be a hostile environment. “If Pakistan would be made into a theocratic state,” she stated confidently, “then religion would be codified and take over our personal lives. It was definitely not in the interest of minori-

⁹ After partition, approximately seven million Mohajirs, an ethnic group of Muslim, Urdu-speaking immigrants moved to Pakistan. Mohajirs, which means refugee, founded the Mohajir Qaumi Mahaz (MQM) or Refugee People’s Movement. Karachi has become a Mohajir stronghold. The MQM has become a key player in Sindh provincial and national politics.

¹⁰ Begum Ra’ana Liaquat Ali Khan, wife of Pakistan’s first Prime Minister founded APWA (All Pakistan’s Women Association) on Feb. 22, 1949. Since APWA was primarily oriented toward social welfare raising issues such as the rehabilitation of millions of Muslim refugees from India, the government did not object to their work.

¹¹ *Aurat Foundation* (translated as ‘Women’s Foundation’) is an NGO based in Karachi that works in the realm of political and legal education of women.

ties¹² or of women. Religion has always been used in Pakistani politics, whether to arouse anti-Indian feelings, to suppress women, whatever. Religion has been a tool to control the masses.” Anis warned against religious mandates coming from the ruling elite in Pakistan. “The ruling elite have been the army, the bureaucracy and the feudals. If you also give them religious sanction it becomes lethal.”

Anis explained how WAF was different from existing women’s organizations at the time of its founding. “I appreciate the role of Begum Liaquat Ali Khan and APWA’s efforts for the implementation of the family-law ordinance and the protection of Islamic laws for women. But more or less it was a service-oriented organization. I’ve been a political activist all my life. APWA has done a lot of good work, but personally I wasn’t attracted to it. It also had a more bureaucratic set-up, where in every small city the wife of the commissioner¹³ would be made the head of APWA. It was more or less pro-establishment.”

From my conversation with Anis, WAF appeared to be more than a feminist movement but also a political movement. WAF, a group of politically conscious, educated women, directly challenged the state and demanded the restoration of the constitution and democracy. “We consciously kept our focus on women and minorities,” she said. “For example the requirement of four male witnesses to witness a rape excluded both women and minorities, for the *hadd* punishment. Throughout this period¹⁴, WAF’s role was reactive. We didn’t have time to think or organize and mobilize women; we were constantly reacting to whether a woman was being awarded lashes, or to women being excluded from sports. WAF was the only organization in existence filling a necessary role.” Ironically women who had previously considered themselves to be in the forefront of the movement for reform and progressive thinking now found that they were part of a subversive movement. Anis told me with much amusement, “WAF became known as a group of ‘radical women’ with links to the KGB!

“The biggest blow for us was the Fehmida Allah Bux¹⁵ case, which we took to the high court. Fehmida and Allah Bux decided to marry out of their own choice. Fehmida’s father disapproved and filed a case of abduc-

tion against his son-in-law, not knowing that the couple would be implicated under the *Hudood* Ordinance. Before the introduction of the *Hudood* Ordinance under General Zia, it would have been filed under the PPC [Pakistan Penal Code] as a criminal case. In 1981 the verdict for the case was announced. The state found that their *nikanama* [marriage contract deed] was not properly registered and the marriage invalid. The court also said that Allah Bux had abducted Fehmida and that the couple was now living in sin. It came as a shock to all of us because the girl was not a minor and had *consented* to the marriage.” Under the *Hudood* Ordinance, if there is a consensual relationship, the couple must provide proof of the *nikah* [literally conjunction, in law denotes the marriage contract] or that it has been legalized properly. Otherwise there are grounds for punishment as willful adultery. Under the family law ordinance the *nikanama* should be registered with the concerned authority, the Union Council. In this case they had a valid *nikanama* but did not go through the process of registration.

Anis continued, “They should only have been punished for not registering the *nikanama*, not for abduction and adultery. The state wanted to send a message and made an example of this couple of what may happen if a woman, and man in this case, chooses to marry someone of her own choice. Within a week we collected seven thousand signatures in Karachi. The high court eventually dismissed the case, which was a huge victory for WAF.”

When WAF came into existence in 1981, two factors were critical in determining the direction the organization would take: there was no organized women’s movement, and martial law was in effect. The former meant that WAF could not plug into an existing organized network of active activists, while the latter curtailed the means available for creating and mobilizing women. General Zia’s policies denied women access to official channels of communication such as television and radio, and initially deterred women from using public means of protest such as pickets and demonstrations.

“So you see, the state was out to terrorize,” Anis told me. “There were debates going on as to whether women could be the head of the state, whether women should cover their hair, whether a woman was allowed to talk to a man unrelated to her. The controversies became ab-

¹² Nearly 97% of 148 million Pakistanis are Muslim: 77% are Sunni and 20% belong to the Shia, Ismaili and other smaller sects. Christians are the largest minority, about 1.5%, with 750,000 Catholics and 850,000 Protestants. Around one million Hindus live in small urban pockets. There is also a small Parsee community (descendants of Persian Zoroastrians) in Karachi and Lahore.

¹³ Each city has a commissioner, which is the equivalent of a mayor in the U.S.

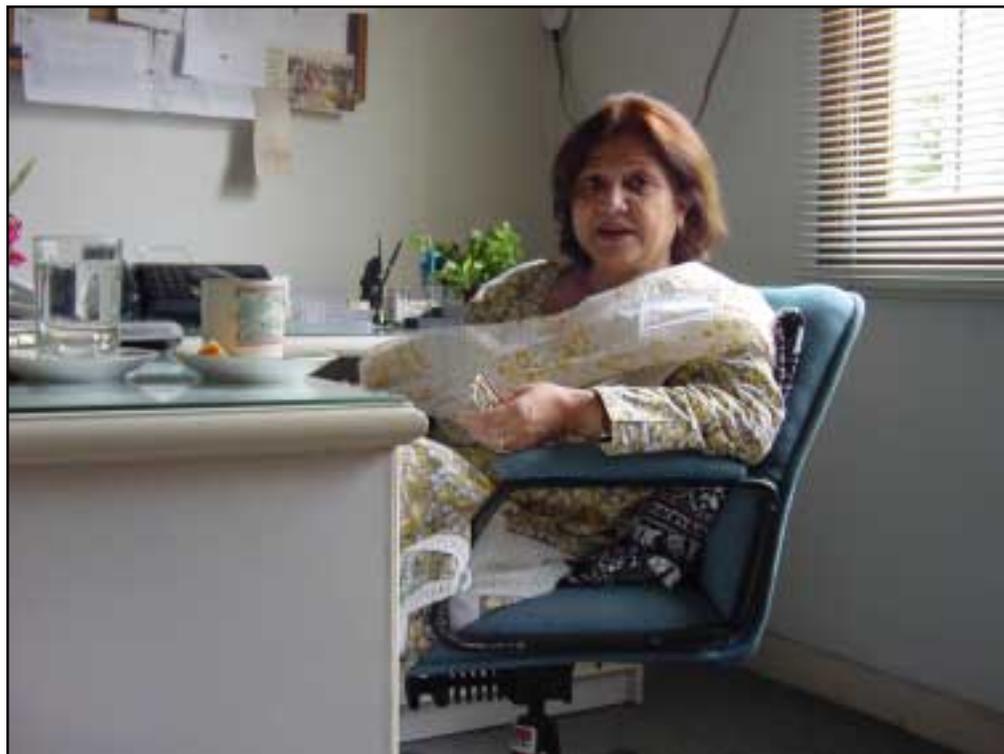
¹⁴ Reference made to the period followed by the coup led by General Zia ul-Haq.

¹⁵ In 1981 Fehmida and Allah Bux were tried and found guilty of *zina* (adultery) and given the maximum punishment under the *Hudood* Ordinance. The important point in this case is not whether Fehmida and Allah Bux were guilty, but rather that neither confessed to the crime and there were no witnesses, i.e., four Muslim male adults of good repute as required under the law. Both the accused repeatedly stated that they were married and produced witnesses to that effect. The couple should have been punished for the delayed registration of their marriage certificate, an offence punishable under Section 5 of the Family Law Ordinance by three months imprisonment or a fine of rupees 1,000, or both, without affecting the legality of the marriage. Instead, Allah Bux was sentenced to death while Fehmida was awarded 100 lashes. The case was later dismissed after having been taken to the level of the Supreme Court.

surd.” Anis said that before the 1977 coup such issues were not debated. This appears to have been one of the darkest periods not only for Pakistan, but also for Islam. “A Pandora’s box had been opened, and everything about women — not men, mind you — were being challenged. I still don’t think that as a nation we have fully recovered from that terrible decade. It was really horrifying. I remember there were public lashes and hangings taking place. The whole atmosphere had changed. The *Jamat-i-Islami* continued to gain strength. Only a military dictator could create fear and terrorize people the way General Zia did. He wanted to create terror and isolate women and terrorize them so they remained in the private domain. His belief system was an extension of the *Jamat-i-Islami*. The army and religious extremism together are a dangerous combination.”

The Fehmida Allah Bux case was pivotal in rallying women activists such as Hilda Saeed, one of the executive directors of Shirkat Gah,¹⁶ a women’s NGO in Karachi. “When she was sentenced to a hundred lashes as an Islamic punishment, women realized that if they did not raise a voice, their very existence would be threatened,” Hilda told me. Fehmida Allah Bux’s case led Shirkat Gah to invite all of the existing women’s organizations to a common platform of thought to find ways to resist the tide of state measures against women. “Under Zia ul-Haq’s martial law, there was an atmosphere of fear and insecurity since all political parties had been disbanded,” she remembered. “Democratic forces were being crushed and there was no freedom to express dissent of any kind. Strict censorship had been imposed on the press. It was in this climate of suffocation that Shirkat Gah and various other women’s groups came together to collectively raise a voice.”

For many years Hilda worked as a forensic scientist in the Karachi chemical examiner’s office examining



Anis Haroon, one of the founding members of WAF (Women’s Action Forum) Pakistan’s first feminist organization.

blood and semen stains in rape and sodomy cases. As a forensic scientist, she began to question the way evidence in criminal cases was handled. She told me that the gathering of evidence in *karo kari*¹⁷ cases was not thorough. “In a *karo kari* case, usually a hatchet would be used to kill someone. I was appalled to see that only a feather was used to gather the blood specimen and further investigation was not conducted. This whole procedure cast a lot of doubt in my mind as to how the whole criminal justice system was treating victims.”

Hilda left the chemical examiner’s office and joined Shirkat Gah in 1978, shortly after the military coup. She was drawn to Shirkat Gah because its agenda was different from existing social welfare groups, such as APWA. Hilda told me that there has been much criticism of Shirkat Gah by the government. “The social welfare approach of NGOs such as APWA was the right one,” it thought. But to speak out, to demand your rights, that was not their idea of NGO work,” she said.

Hilda painted a different picture of Pakistan’s earlier cultural background, in sharp contrast to the early 1980s when strict versions of Islamic laws were being introduced. As we conversed over a traditional *Gujrati* (from Gujarat, a province in India) lunch of *aloo bhujia*

¹⁶ *Shirkat Gah*, literally ‘a place of participation’ was established in 1975 as a women’s resource center with the purpose of integrating consciousness-raising with a development perspective. Today, with offices in Karachi and Lahore, its objective is to increase women’s autonomy, promote gender equality and actively cultivate democratic norms.

(potato curry), *daal* (lentils), rice and *samosas* (pastries stuffed with vegetables) at her home, she reminisced about the Pakistan she knew as a child. Hilda is a Christian and came to Pakistan with her family from Gujarat when she was 11 months old. At Partition her father, who was a government official, was given a choice: He could be based either in India or in Pakistan. Her family, like hundreds of other Christian families, chose to stay in Pakistan.

I asked Hilda what it was like for a Christian family to live in Pakistan. She said Karachi was the melting pot of Pakistan — a mosaic of many different ethnic groups living together. She recalled Quaid-e-Azam's¹⁸ speech in 1947, when he said that as far as the state was concerned, Christians will continue to live as Christians, Parsees as Parsees, Hindus as Hindus. "The Quaid reassured all minority groups that religion would not be the affair of the state. The idea was that Pakistan would be a homeland for Muslims. There is big difference between calling Pakistan a homeland for Muslims and having an Islamic ideology." Hilda remembers a time when she and her sisters were going around in shorts and skirts and wore sleeveless sarees. This was true for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. "I didn't come from an unorthodox family, in many ways it was far more orthodox than some of my Catholic friends. We had Hindu neighbors and celebrated *diwali* (Hindu festival of lights) with *mitai* (sweet meats). My father's best friend was a Hindu. We also had very close Muslim and Sikh friends."

In those days prominent Christian judges, such as Justice Cornelius and Justice Raymond sat on the Sindh high court. Most of the prominent architects of the time were from the Parsee community. "The college I attended DJ (Deyaram Jethmal), was established by a Hindu. In fact the majority of philanthropists and educational establishments were set up by minority groups especially the Parsees and Christians."¹⁹

Hilda, contrary to her family's wishes, married a Muslim. Inter-faith marriages, while not unheard of in Pakistan, were and to a large extent still are — uncommon. "My family, as well as my husband's, was against the marriage. Religion was never that important to either my husband or me, so that was not an issue. I did not convert to Islam, nor did my husband ask me to. My husband's mother on the other hand prayed that I would become a Muslim before she died. I know it caused her a lot of pain that I never converted." Hilda told me that her husband has been encouraging her about her work with WAF and Shirkat Gah. "I was involved in activism when we met, so he always knew how I felt about

women's issues. But honestly, I know he would have liked for me to have been at home more."

I asked Hilda how life for women had changed after the enactment of the *Hudood* Ordinance. "I was taken aback as a woman and as a minority with the introduction of the *Hudood* Ordinance, which introduced the blasphemy laws affecting the Christian community and all other minorities." These laws meant that only Muslim witnesses could testify in criminal cases. Hilda told me about a recent case where four Christian men witnessed the rape of a five-year-old girl. Under the Ordinance, their testimony was invalid, since only Muslims can be witnesses. "This the grim reality we still face today. In cases of rape, most women chose not to file an FIR [First Information Report], due to the difficulty of proving that a rape had occurred." Recording an FIR becomes the beginning of an admission that a woman has had sexual relations outside of marriage. Just this alone has incriminated women and landed them in jail. Hilda told me of a woman in a Multan jail who filed a rape case, was subsequently accused of adultery, was put in jail and lashed 100 times. "The consequences of *Hudood* Ordinance are devastating for women who have been raped. Religious extremism has long been a convenient tool that has been used at will to control women. It has been manipulated by governments and self-appointed moral watchdogs alike. But no religion preaches this. It just doesn't make sense."

The Islamization process started under General Zia's rule has left a deep impression on the country. I asked Hilda whether it was possible for the women's-rights movement in Pakistan to be secular or feminist. "This issue was brought up at the first WAF meeting. Should WAF take an Islamic approach and have the arguments ready? Or on the other hand, do we go by the UN Charter on Human Rights? The *Hudood* laws and the *Qanun-e-Shahadat*, [laws of evidence], said that just because of your sex you are less. It was inconceivable. There just was no reason for it. It had reached the stage where qualified women lawyers were being told that they could not sign certain documents." All the Muslim and non-Muslim members of WAF agreed that the organization should adopt a secular approach. Anything else would not work.

Although Hilda would rather not look at what a certain *ayat* or *surah*²⁰ says on a subject, since she joined Shirgat Gah she has realized the importance of recognizing religious arguments. "There is no other way of getting through to much of the public unless we use religious language, especially with many of our projects. This is particularly true when we work with women in rural

¹⁷ *Karo-kari* are killings of men or women supposedly justified because the honor of the killer or killer's family has been besmirched by the person killed. *Karo*, (translated from Sindhi) means "morally corrupt man" and *kari* "morally corrupt women."

¹⁸ Quaid-e-Azam ("great leader") refers to the founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

¹⁹ Christians in Karachi have been particularly active in the establishment of education and health services, such as the Holy Family and Seventh Day Hospitals.

²⁰ *Ayat* or *surah* refers to a verse from the *Qur'an*.

areas. We get asked what is Islamically acceptable with respect to reproductive rights. We must remain cognizant of this reality. Today Shirkat Gah is the Asia coordinator of 'Women Living Under Muslim Laws'." Women Living Under Muslim Laws, with headquarters in Southern France, argues that women should work within an Islamic framework, but must chronicle and explore feminist ways of interpreting, thinking and relating. "Women Living Under Muslim Laws is very different from a religious approach. The whole pattern of thinking is very different, so we do not feel that our secular approach is in any way compromised." The purpose, Hilda explained, is to constantly shift the parameters of the framework and debate, edging the circle of religious containment to become wider and wider.

I asked Hilda why, if most Pakistanis do not support strict versions of Islam, there was not a mass outcry when

General Zia took over? "You see, he worked in invidious ways. Even before General Zia, there was Ayub Khan, who was also a military dictator. In 1958 when General Khan imposed martial law, he banned all political activity." Hilda believed that General Ayub did not cause as much harm as General Zia, but laid the groundwork for a deliberate deterioration of the country. Like General Zia, Ayub ruled Pakistan for ten years, from 1958 to 1968. "We lost a whole decade back then. Then came the formation of the Pakistan People's Party with Bhutto leading the struggle for democracy. Whether I agree with him or not is a different matter. In that struggle he eventually won the election. A few years later, Bhutto unfortunately selected Zia ul-Haq to oversee all the military and airforce. General Zia was a sly worker. He pretended to be very religious and all. He worked his way up and was on good terms with Bhutto. He literally overnight removed Bhutto from the stage, put him in prison where he stayed until that horrible judgment.²¹ Mind you three judges opted out, resigned at that point as they did not want to have anything to do with this case. This was a total travesty of justice."



Hilda Saeed believes that Pakistan must work toward a society that is not defined by a particular religion, since all morality then becomes defined within those religious parameters.

Described by many as the high point of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, General Zia's decade of power (1977-88) witnessed the convergence of interests between the military rulers and politico-religious groups. The former sought political support for credibility, while the latter sought access to power consistently denied them through the electoral process. The religious discourse initiated under Zia emerged against the backdrop of a much wider crisis of national identity in which a politically illegitimate martial-law regime turned Islamic as a means of containing intra-state conflict. More importantly, General Zia used Islam as a cloak for imposing even more repressive and undemocratic measures and preempted opposition to these measures. As politicians were bending over to prove their Islamic credentials there was a sharp increase in sectarian violence and the entrenchment of intolerance.²²

"People are religious," Hilda told me. "As you can see, the whole city shuts down for several hours for Friday prayers and mosques are filled, but only a small minority wants a religious government. But most people do not want religious edicts being thrown down their throats all the time. Pakistan must work towards a society that is not defined by a particular religion, since all morality then becomes defined within those religious parameters." She warned that in an Islamic

²¹ On July 5, 1977 Bhutto was arrested on trumped up murder charges, tried and convicted. Despite international outcry and protest, he was hanged in April 1979.

²² *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Mumtaz and Shaheed.

state, interpretation of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*²³ are invoked to settle every issue. Since each has his own interpretation this led to the divisiveness that Pakistan has today, between the Sunnis and Shias, the Deobandis and the Bralevis²⁴ and Ahmedis²⁵. "There is invidious sectarian violence between various religious factions. Who is behind all this is not quite clear. Once a state is labeled Islamic, the questions become what model of Islam will be enforced? The Sunni Wahabi model? The Iranian Shia model? The Taliban model?"

I asked Hilda if she thought a return to democracy could ever eliminate the *Hudood* Ordinance. "The problem is that when Zia ul-Haq introduced the *Hudood* Ordinances that he made these laws a part of the constitution. On the one hand you have Article 25 and 27 of the Constitution of 1973, which promises equality irrespective of sex, creed, color, and on the other hand you have the *Hudood* Ordinance, which in my opinion is indicative of inequality. The other problem with the *Hudood* Ordinance is that it has introduced a parallel system of law, since we already had the Pakistan Penal Code. We also now have the Islamic *Shariah*²⁶ system." Which system will be used, the Pakistani Penal Code or the *Shariah*, is determined by the police. In an FIR for example, rape cases are lodged under the *Hudood* Ordinance and will subsequently be tried under the Islamic *Shariah* system.

With General Zia's death in August 1988 and the return to democracy, the pace of the women's movement changed perceptively. WAF continued with its activism but became less reactionary compared to days of military rule. "The activism was more dynamic in those early years," Hilda told me. "But back then the situation demanded a different kind of activism. The initial activism — making noise, holding rallies — was needed at that time to raise awareness. Today that awareness-raising is still needed, but in a different way. Today many WAF members are also involved in development projects. We realized that it was not enough to tell someone that they did not have rights. We had to work with communities on a sustained basis. The women's movement is far from over," Hilda assured me. "It's still evolving and we have a lot of work left to do. Shirkat Gah and WAF have been a deep-down personal experience for me. They have shifted my thinking and added to how I've always felt about women. Sharing with others how I feel about these issues has given me great strength."

Anis had also conveyed to me that the success of the women's movement lies in the fact that the situation could

have become far worse at various levels, but because of the struggles the regressive moves were impeded. "While the laws were not repealed or changed, it became difficult to implement them with impunity. Many of the harsh sentences awarded under these laws were not carried out. This is attributed to the strength of WAF and the collective women's movement. I see WAF continuing to play the role of a catalyst for change and continuing to give options to women."

I found it interesting that WAF never raised funds as an organization except for a nominal membership fee and has never had permanent office space. I asked Anis why WAF chose to remain unstructured. "I think that was one of the most positive aspects of WAF. Mostly we had our meetings at the homes of our members. People have criticized WAF for not being more organized, for not having a formal office space and taking funds. That is one way of thinking. WAF still has credibility, people do come to our events and ask us for our perspective on various issues. But WAF's very lack of structure has allowed it to be an awareness-raising platform. WAF, unlike other NGOs, has not been in competition for any projects. Maybe WAF doesn't have that much to show on paper about our successes, but we have been a catalyst for change."

In the 54 years since independence, religion has been used by those in power most often by right-wing elements. Since the late 70s, there have been attempts to convert Pakistan into a theocracy. The *Hudood* Ordinances were introduced and *Shariat* Courts were established. Those in power espoused a puritanical Islam. I asked Anis about the growth of *madressahs*²⁷, and about the possibilities of a Taliban or puritan revolution in Pakistan if religious groups acquire a more political agenda and become allied with key levers of power in the civilian or military authority.

She reflected for a moment and replied, "It is a sad and alarming situation. I do see it as a threat. Not because I think that the people of Pakistan support Talibanization and they want that sort of a setup in this society. The danger of Talibanization comes from the top, not from the grassroots. There have been many elections in Pakistan, people never voted for the religious parties. They vote the economic ticket. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan left Pakistan with endless post-conflict problems. It was at this time that internal conflicts began to gain strength. The militarization of Pakistan under General Zia set the stage for the opening of *madressahs*, an unprecedented increase of sectarian violence, and ba-

²³ *Sunnah* literally means 'the path' within Muslim discourse, it means the traditions set by the Prophet Mohammad.

²⁴ Deobandis and Bralevis were two major schools of Islamic thought which emerged after 1857 in India. These groups tended to voice concerns with what they viewed as the psychological, cultural spiritual disintegration of the Muslim community in India. While differences occurred between the Deobandis and Berelvis they shared in common a dogmatic approach to Islam.

²⁵ Ahmadi, a 19th century splinter group of Islam does not acknowledge Mohammad as the last prophet of Islam. They were declared non-Muslims in a 1974 amendment to the Pakistani Constitution.

²⁶ *Shariah* law, derived from the *Qur'an*, is socio-religious law in Islam.

²⁷ A *madressah* is mosque school.

sically led to a breeding ground for all types of militants. Karachi experienced some of the worst violence in Pakistan's history during this time and has still not recovered from the conflict. It's a horrifying phenomenon. If people do not realize the potential of this happening in Pakistan and don't raise their voices, there is a danger. And to think that this is only isolated along the Pakistani-Afghan border is also a misplaced belief. People in Kabul 30 years ago would never have thought that the Taliban could take over their city."

Such possibilities, albeit unlikely, have added a sense of insecurity about the country's direction. Time will reveal whether the crumbling current order will be replaced by a radically different one through means other than democratic change.

General Zia used the so-called Islamization process to legitimize and perpetuate his military rule. In contrast today, General Pervez Musharraf's speeches have been marked by pro-Ataturk rhetoric, calling religious organizations "jihadi groups". Although he seized power in an October, 1999 coup, he did not declare himself President until just before the July, 2000 Agra summit, where he discussed the Kashmir conflict with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. In a speech he gave on live Pakistani television just weeks short of the Agra summit, the General declared that he is hoping to move Pakistan back in the direction of the Quaid's vision, meaning that religion would have no place in politics. While Musharraf, a moderate, has voiced his intention of moving Pakistan towards democracy and a secular state, I wondered how this would play out over the next several months while groups such as the *Jamat-i-Islami* continue to exert influence in the country's local-body elections.

I asked Anis that with Musharraf now president, what she thought lay ahead for activism and the women's movement. "It really is an irony that we are now placing so much hope on General Musharraf, an army chief who has taken over who now has declared himself the president. People have this belief that the previous military under General Zia created the mess that we have today — the Taliban, encouraging sectarian violence, fundamentalism — so the army should now be responsible for cleaning it up. If the army can't do it, then nobody can do it *at the moment*," she emphasized. "Only they have the power to stop these militant groups."

With Pakistan undergoing a period of self-examination on many fronts, there is hardly a Pakistani who does not want to see the condition of the country improve, and in particular, to see the Kashmir issue resolved ami-

cably. Many Pakistanis believe that General Musharraf is a sincere person, a man of peace and of his words. Anis shares this belief, but has her doubts. "I don't doubt his integrity or his sincerity. My doubts are about the whole system," she sadly stated. "He is part of the system. He will not be able to go much beyond that. He is still working within the same military, the same structures. The army has been a part of the problem since the very beginning. To expect that suddenly that they will now solve everything for us is unrealistic. I'm really not sure whether they can do it. There is a lot of uncertainty in the country."

Unfortunately, since there is no other political party that can play a strong and vital political role, the Pakistani people have no other alternative to the army. Most Pakistanis have alienated themselves from the whole process. Anis reflected, "There is so much unemployment, so much hunger. People want the basics, security in their lives, jobs, shelter. They want to know where their next meal is coming from."

Without a doubt, women have found themselves confronting conservative religious elements in their struggle for their rights. Whether they succeed depends not only on their own strength and organizational ability, but also to a large extent on the attitude of the government. It was not until General Zia's military regime with its particular brand of Islam, started to rescind women's status overnight, that women's groups felt the need to establish an advocacy lobby for women on a sustained basis. Anis expressed to me that while many women hold that they are believing and practicing Muslims, they do not want the state to be located within the parameters of Islam. According to both Anis and Hilda, when a state declares itself to be *consciously* Islamic, as in the case of Pakistan, it then proceeds to define what and who a Muslim is. This being the case even today, it is not surprising that Pakistan is as divided as it is.

There are indeed a number of issues confronting the women's movement today. Activism in Pakistan expresses itself in many forms at diverse levels. While activism may defy neat analysis, what is apparent is that the women's movement has raised awareness of women's concerns on several levels and new women's organizations have been established. The women's movement is still in an on-going process of metamorphosis and change, in which the issues as well as its own visions will continue to develop. As the women's movement reviews its positions, the alarming pace of political developments and frequent restructuring of political alliances currently taking place in Pakistan is likely to keep it on the alert. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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