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## Feminism in Pakistan: Dialogues between Pakistani Feminists

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# **Feminism in Pakistan:**

## **Dialogues between Pakistani Feminists**

Annie Serez

### **I. Introduction**

Many commentators in the Western world look upon Pakistani feminism as a recent phenomenon, applauding South-Asian feminists for their progression up the scale of human development as they advocate for women's equality and basic human rights within an oppressive, religious, male-dominated culture. This, however, is a false perception of Pakistani culture and of the majority of Muslim societies in general. Feminism, in its various forms, has been present and active in Pakistan since the nation's founding in 1947. As a country, Pakistan has a history of political division between secularism and the Islamization of law and society (Cheema 60). These two political camps, whose histories are both based in Pakistan's colonial past, have been competing for power since the nation's independence and have influenced Pakistan's two main feminist camps: secular feminism and Islamic feminism. These two camps have their own history of dialogue and discourse with each other which is no less hostile than the dialogue between Pakistan's political parties. This paper will explore this dialogue between secular and Islamic feminists within Pakistan while analyzing the impact that these feminist discourses have had on Pakistani society; as the divide between secular and Islamic feminists increases and hostilities rise, the possibility of social change decreases for Pakistani women. The paper will also address the contemporary, parallel problem of feminist struggles in Tunisia, the Arab world's "leading women's rights" nation, in order to contextualize the Pakistani feminist situation.

### **II. The Pakistani Context**

Pakistan gained its independence from Britain in 1947. Unlike today's conservative Islamic society, Pakistan was founded as a democratic, secular state which promised religious freedom to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as well as equal rights for women. Further, its founding father, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was a progressive, secular member of the elite class. In an attempt to

create a tolerant, pluralistic state, Jinnah established Pakistan as a republic. This vision was intended to bring freedom to the ninety-seven percent Muslim population while also protecting the rights and freedoms of all religions (Valentine 104). During this time, women enjoyed many privileges and freedoms under the first Muslim Shariat laws, which guaranteed them political representation, equal pay, and inheritance and divorce rights (Cheema). Many of these freedoms can be traced back to the work done by Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Ali Jinnah, who founded multiple women's rights movements before and after the establishment of Pakistan as a nation (Ovais). Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, the wife of Liaquat Ali Khan (Pakistan's first Minister of Finance and close friend of Ali Jinnah), also played a significant role in ensuring women's rights. In particular, she established the All Women's Pakistan Association in 1949, which aimed to further women's moral and social standing across the country (Ovais).

It was not until the late 1970s, under the rule of Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, that Pakistan began to move towards political Islamization. In light of the war in Afghanistan and the threat of U.S. invasion, right-wing, conservative, politico-religious groups called for the establishment of Shari'a law in Pakistan, and in 1977, Zia-ul-Haq took power and declared Pakistan an Islamic Republic. It was under Zia's rule in 1979 that the notoriously misogynistic Hudood laws, new ordinances which covered rape, adultery, theft, robbery, and prohibition, were implemented (Jamal 51). The 1984 Law of Evidence soon followed, declaring that the testimonies of two women were needed in order to counter the testimony of one man (Cheema). By the mid-1980s, women had effectively become second-class citizens in Pakistan and held few rights within the patriarchal society.

During this era, many modern women's rights movements were established in resistance to these laws. For example, the Women's Action Forum was established in 1981 and staged large protests against the Law of Evidence and the Hudood ordinances (Gardezi 18). Women's rights movements gained the most traction in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the government of Benazir Bhutto. After Bhutto was removed from office in 1996, however, the Council of Islamic Ideology cracked down on women's rights movements and established laws making it illegal for women to protest in public (Cheema). Today, women in Pakistan continue to fight for their rights in spite of the legal consequences.

### III. The Two Feminisms

There are two dominant threads of feminist discourse within Pakistan today: secular liberal feminism and modern Islamic feminism. These two threads are not unique to Pakistan. In fact, they have been deeply influenced by contem-

porary global feminist discourses. When mixed with geographic, historical, and contemporary social contexts, however, the theories and practices which accompany these two threads manifest themselves in ways which reflect the particularity of the Pakistani feminist situation. In order to understand this Pakistani hybrid, both its outer influences and its current social context must be understood.

Secular feminist theory advocates for equal rights between men and women, viewing feminism as a basic extension of universal human rights. Some of Pakistan's leading contemporary secular feminists include Shahnaz Rouse, Fouzia Saeed, Farida Shaheed, Khawar Mumtaz and Nighat Said Khan. These figures are responsible for the majority of secular feminist literature in Pakistan and serve as the representatives of many secularist human rights movements. In a sharp break with their Islamic counterparts, secular feminists also advocate for the separation of religion and state. Within this perspective, Islam is seen as a problem that women are fighting to overcome. For instance, Fouzia Saeed speaks publicly about her sexual abuse in the workplace, attributing her ordeal to religious factors. This abuse was committed in the name of Islam as an intimidation tactic to force women out of the public workplace ("Negotiating New Terrains" 91). This horrible experience led Saeed to become a secular women's rights activist (Abid). As a secular feminist, Saeed does not believe that Islam is compatible with equality. A large portion of secular feminist discourse is consequently aimed towards "enlightening" Muslim women by educating them on the freedom that is available outside of Islam. This discourse is considered "paternalistic" by Islamic feminists and many Muslim women in general and is one of the main reasons for the ongoing division between secular feminists and the majority of Pakistani Muslim women.

Modern Islamic feminism takes a different approach to women's freedom. Instead of advocating for fifty-fifty equality between men and women, Islamic feminists call for men to uphold their responsibilities towards women and for women to be educated about their rights (Hébert 2). This form of feminism does not call for the eradication of gender roles or the institution of democracy. Instead, Islamic feminism calls for the proper treatment of women within a Muslim society as laid out in the Qur'an. As expressed by feminist historian Margot Badran, Islamic feminism tries "to open up the Qur'an to anti-patriarchal readings" ("Asma Barlas" 15). Instead of blaming Islam for Pakistan's extreme Shari'a laws, Islamic feminists blame men and their patriarchal legal traditions for the discrimination women face. These feminists attempt to merge Islamic rights and freedoms with contemporary Pakistani culture. They make it clear that they are not fighting for what Western women have gained but for what

the Qur'an can give them (Hébert 1). Because of the movement's rejection of Western ideals and acceptance of Qur'anic principles, Islamic feminism tends to appeal to people who value the teachings of the Qur'an, primarily the lower, middle and upper-middle strata of society (Cheema). Thus, the movement's more conservative theology appeals to a larger portion of society than that of the elite, leftist secular feminists.

Conflict between feminist circles in any context is common. However, the divide between secular and Islamic feminist communities in Pakistan is uncommonly wide and especially hostile due to influences that go beyond feminism itself. Part of this conflict derives from contemporary Pakistani class divisions. In general, women are categorized into three main groups: the elite, the middle class, and the lower class. Belonging in one of these classes largely predetermines what kind of feminist a Pakistani woman will be. This predetermination stems from the fact that women in each of these classes are treated differently according to their social standing and, therefore, are impacted differently by Pakistan's Islamic laws (Akhtar and Metraux). Women in the elite class, due to their resources and social standing, live a privileged lifestyle that often exempts them from the consequences of Shari'a law. Middle and lower class rural women, however, have little to no influence within their social circles and, consequently, are fully subject to Pakistan's oppressive Islamic laws. Therefore, due to their superior resources, higher education, and greater internationalization, women from the elite class tend to be more receptive to a progressive, secular lifestyle and its corresponding brand of feminism. Middle and lower class women have fewer privileges and less access to education and thus gravitate towards Islamic feminism due to their familiarity with the religion and its associated values (Kalia 99). Thus, the division between feminist theories is predicated as much on class differences as it is theological disagreements.

Because of this societal gap, the dialogue between secular and Islamic feminists in the Pakistani context mainly consists of attempts by both factions to delegitimize each other's platform in order to support their own particular view (Jamal 57). Thus, dialogue across political and theological circles tends to devolve into competition or argument in which both sides "yell" loudly but neither is truly heard. On one hand, secular feminist discourse seeks to discredit Islamic feminism by regurgitating orientalist arguments regarding Muslim women and the veil. The concept of Purdah in Pakistan, a physical and metaphorical curtain dividing men from women, is a particularly controversial issue that has been at the center of the struggle between secular and Islamic feminists. Secular feminists argue that Purdah encourages gender segregation in both the private

and public spheres. According to this view, Purdah reinforces the principle that, as the weaker sex, women “need protection [from] the household’s men” (Riaz 35). On the other hand, Islamic feminists look to the Qur’an to justify gender segregation in a way that provides agency to women. For example, they consider veiling to be a safe practice that allows women to feel secure in the knowledge that they are exempt from the scrutiny of the public eye. Despite these explanations offered by Islamic feminists, secular feminists point to the discriminatory laws, such as the Hudood ordinances, that were implemented due to the principle of Purdah and criticize the Qur’an for its “faulted” or “outdated” rules regarding the treatment of women (Riaz 35). Thus, the accusations against Islamic practices once again revolve around the concept of fear – in this case, fear of the oppressive Pakistani Shari’a law. This appeal to fear can also be seen in the secular school’s most prominent accusation against Islamic feminists, namely the claim that Islamic feminists are mere “fundamentalists” with a conservative, right-wing agenda (Jamal 57). This accusation is meant to delegitimize Islamic feminists and instill fear in Pakistan’s secular groups about the rise of Islamization.

Two of the loudest and most controversial international voices advocating for secular, liberal feminism are the Somali-Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi-Ali and the Pakistani Islamic reformist Irshad Manji. Hirsi-Ali is known for her contentious critiques and accusatory statements about Islam and the treatment of women within Islamic cultures. Hirsi-Ali blames Islamic ideology and religion for the abuse, repression, and violence suffered by Muslim women in Islamic societies. She claims that Islam is an inherently violent religion and is the cause of the mistreatment of women in Muslim majority cultures (De Leeuw and Van Wichelen 3). Irshad Manji, a Pakistani-Canadian feminist and Islamic reformist, has spoken alongside Hirsi Ali multiple times on the dangers of Islam and the need for Islamic reform. As a member of the LGBT community, Manji has experienced Pakistani Islam as a conservative, repressive religion, unaccepting of her sexuality and her beliefs. Because of this personal experience, she strongly criticizes Pakistani society and Islamic religion, calling for the reform of both (Manji).

As such, the platforms of both Manji and Hirsi-Ali are highly critical of Islam and many Muslims consider them to be ignorant of the differences between culture, religion, and social context (Gebreyes). These critics hold that it is not Manji and Hirsi-Ali’s platforms that hinder opportunities for dialogue but rather their unwillingness to attempt to understand other viewpoints. For example, Hirsi-Ali’s statements proclaiming that Islam is “the new fascism” and “a destructive, nihilistic cult of death” do not foster an environment for empathetic

listening. Instead, such statements increase polarization and enlarge the existing gap between secular and Islamic feminists. These accusatory attempts at delegitimization are inherently reactionary and, as reactionary responses tend to be, rooted in fear. In the battle to win respect in the eyes of the global public, anti-Islamic statements by secular feminists like Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji serve as a weapon to denigrate Islamic feminism (Khalid).

Islamic feminist discourse engages in the same sort of attempt to delegitimize its opponents. They do this through the rhetoric of Western collaboration and domination within Pakistan. The main accusation is that secular feminist movements are “embedded in Western notions of autonomy and freedom that are supposed to be contrary to indigenous cultural or religious practices” (Jamal 56). This perspective purports that feminism as a movement is inseparable from its Western connotation and therefore is not legitimate in Pakistan. As Kimball outlines in his article on hermeneutic listening, in order for dialogue to successfully affect change, both parties must be willing to listen to the other while also acknowledging that their biases influence their understanding of the other (Kimball and Garrison 51). These characteristics are not present in the Pakistani feminist dialogue. Instead of constructively bridging the gap between secular and Islamic feminist theories, these dialogues often intensify the segregation between the two groups (Jamal 57). If each group chooses to ignore the other’s similarities and instead focus on their extreme differences, dialogue between feminist circles will continue to be accusatory and hostile. Conversely, dialogue which occurs within the boundaries of either secularist or Islamist circles tends to be much more civil than dialogue which occurs outside of these circles. The reason for this increased civility is that each activist within the group shares the same core values, making it easier for the women to set aside their own opinions and listen to what the other is saying.

This unity can be observed in the dialogue regarding feminism and “the West” between the Pakistani Islamic feminist Asma Barlas and the Lebanese-American Islamic feminist Margot Badran. In an essay detailing her ongoing dialogue with Margot Badran, Barlas explains how a successful in-group dialogue resulted in her shift in perspective regarding the term “feminist.” As an Islamic “feminist” (feminist being in quotations because of Badran’s original hesitation to use the term), Badran’s platform is typically anti-Western. However, the extremity of her convictions initially caused her to reject the term “feminist” due to her assumption about its implied Western affiliation. The dialogue which occurs between Badran and Barlas causes Badran to conclude that Islamic feminists’ rejection of the term “feminism” is in fact due to an ignorance of the

historical feminist movement within Islam.

Within their dialogue, Badran addresses Barlas' two major questions: First, is feminism a Western concept, or is there evidence of it in Islamic history? And second, can one resist the label of "feminist" while still advocating for women's rights? Like many Pakistani Muslim "feminists," Barlas previously rejected the term "feminism" because of its (perceived) representation of Western ideals. In particular, she expresses her frustration at the ignorance of Western women regarding Muslim or "brown" agency, stating that her "resistance was a displacement of frustration with real, live, feminists, all of them white... many of [whom] seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of speaking for women of color" ("Asma Barlas" 17). In essence, Barlas argues that the "liberty" associated with Western feminism is muted for non-white individuals. For those who do not uphold Western values, Western feminism entails loss of voice and loss of self, often as a result of the attempts by Western women to "save" Muslims from the shackles of oppressive religion. By treating independent, self-actualizing Muslim women as oppressed and in need of foreign intervention, the paternalistic attitudes of Western feminists thus leads many Pakistani feminists to reject the term "feminism" due to its affiliation with "Western liberty."

In theory, all types of feminism seek equal rights between men and women. The differences between the feminist strands emerge when feminists attempt to define "equality." Is equality measured in sameness or in value? Islamic feminists argue that the problem with Western feminism is that it advocates for sameness between men and women. However, is "sameness" true equality? In her essay, Barlas describes women as equal to men but not the same as men. This view means that women should be treated with equal value, but they should not be subject to all of the same laws. A counterexample to this view would be the Free the Nipple Movement in the United States which advocates for women's right to "go topless" in public. The FTN movement is fighting for women to be subject to the same laws as men regardless of sexual differences (Zeilinger). Islamic feminists, however, would disagree with this form of activism since it disregards traditional gender roles and ignores the physical differences between the male and female anatomy. Islamic feminists argue that they are not fighting for what Western women have gained but rather for their own particular rights as outlined in the Qur'an. However, many Western feminists argue that the conception of equality espoused by Islamic feminists is the product of naiveté and ignorance. Instead of working together with their Islamic counterparts, these Western feminists attempt to impose their own brand of "equality" on the women of Pakistan. Barlas, like most Islamic feminists, has no patience for this kind of

condescending attitude. Hence, Barlas argues that Western feminists have tainted the core concepts of feminism through their misunderstanding of “equality” and their “paternalistic” attitudes towards non-Western women (“Asma Barlas” 17). Because of these differences, Barlas originally rejected the term “feminist” in its entirety.

In light of these critiques of both Islamic and Western feminism, the question becomes: “What is feminism?” Specifically, is feminism only a Western concept? Islamic feminism, as defined by Margot Badran, is a “discourse of gender equality that derives its mandate from the Qur’an and seeks rights and justice for all human beings across the totality of the public-private continuum” (Badran qtd. in “Margot Badran: Engaging Islamic Feminism” 28). In opposition to this view, critics of Islam frequently point to the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as the source of women’s oppression. Badran attempts to counter this argument by highlighting the significant roles that women played in Islamic society during the time of the Prophet. The Prophet’s first wife, herself a prominent business woman, was a strong and powerful leader, responsible for both helping her husband realize his potential and recording his teachings after his passing. As Badran points out, the fact that women such as the Prophet Muhammad’s wife served in a capacity equal to, or nearly equal to, men suggests that the roots of feminism existed in the early Islamic society described in the Qur’an, long before the advent of Western feminism.

Therefore, Badran encourages Barlas to embrace the term “feminist” confidently knowing that feminism is an Islamic ideal. Badran’s perspective has since influenced Barlas to change her views on the term “feminism.” She now calls herself an Islamic feminist, rejecting the negative Western connotations of the term and linking herself with historical Islam (“Margot Badran” 23). This conversation is an example of the significance of meaningful, in-group dialogue.

#### **IV. Common Enemies: the Malala Case-Study**

Despite their numerous differences, both Islamic and secular feminists do share a common interest in the improvement of women’s rights, and that makes both groups a perceived threat to Islamic society according to Pakistan’s right-wing politico-religious parties, all of which reject feminism entirely. These parties claim that any teachings promoting women’s equality trade Qur’anic principles for hedonistic, secular Western ideals. Consequently, Islamic feminists, and, more pointedly, secular feminists who reject Islam outright, are frequently in danger from Islamic extremists and even risk imprisonment or assassination by the government for violating the blasphemy law. For example, in December

## SEREZ

2007, the world watched as Pakistan's first and only female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, was assassinated by two gunmen after leaving a rally. Although she was one of the strongest symbols of women's empowerment in Pakistan throughout the 1990's, Bhutto had become a victim of the "culture of exclusion and male dominance," against which she fought (Akhtar and Metraux). In April 2015, another prominent figure, the well-known activist and human rights advocate Sabeen Mahmud, was assassinated in a similar manner after hosting a seminar with a group of political activists in Karachi (Thilesen). Whether the offending person is Islamic or secular, politician or activist, contemporary Pakistan is a dangerous country for those who speak out against the dominant patriarchal culture.

The life and work of the world-renowned Pakistani advocate for women's education Malala Yousafzai provides a clear example of the struggle between Islamic feminism, secular feminism, and the Western world. Much dialogue and critique have been sparked regarding the Western representation of young Malala as Pakistan's feminist heroine. This short case study will examine how Malala's life and educational mission has crossed between the boundaries of traditional Pakistani culture, secular feminism, personal faith, and Western ideals while analyzing how Malala is perceived within these varying circles. Although she is celebrated all over the world, Malala's affiliation with so many different political, religious, and activist circles essentially leaves her isolated from full acceptance in any one group.

Malala identifies as a practicing Muslim, a Pakistani citizen, and an advocate for peace through education. For many of her critics, these three forms of identification cannot coexist. Pakistan's conservative politico-religious groups renounce Malala as a Muslim because of the fact that she advocates for rights that are perceived to be contrary to Islamic principles. Pakistani, female, Muslim activists do not accept her within their Islamic feminist circles because they believe her agenda aligns too closely with secular feminism. Secular feminists do not agree with her Islamic principles, and the West likes to conveniently forget that she identifies as a practicing Muslim. Malala's situation consequently leaves her in a limbo of belonging.

Riffat Hassan, a well-known Pakistani, Muslim feminist, comments on this conundrum of the isolation of Islamic feminists in her article, "Muslim Women and Human Rights: The Unarticulated Quandary." Hassan states that many Islamic feminists develop a distrust of Muslim societies due to the persecution that they experience because of their feminist activism. Malala, for example, considers herself a devout Muslim, yet the fact that she advocates for

women's education has resulted in her becoming a target for the Taliban. This distrust often leads to bitterness and anger towards Islamic patriarchal systems, a reaction which in turn garners support and sympathy from the West, such as Malala experienced after she was shot by the Taliban (Hassan). Western sympathy, however, is extended only so long as Muslim women remain "rebels and deviants within the world of Islam" (Hassan). Malala is loved and praised by the West because she is despised by the Taliban, a terrorist group that fits nicely into the Western world's category of "bad Muslims." However, her Islamic faith is rarely mentioned by the media. Therefore, on one hand, Malala does not fit Western ideals because she openly proclaims her Islamic faith. On the other hand, she battles against terrorists and the suppressors of women, so the West is willing to ignore her faith and instead emphasize the values that she shares with Western society.

As Malala is further endorsed by Western countries, the distance between her and the largely conservative Pakistani public grows larger. For example, after she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, the media exploded with dialogue between secular and Muslim academics who argued over the effects that this award would have on her education campaign. Tabish Khair, an Indian author and professor, commented, "what Islamist extremists could not do with their brutality and bullets, the West seems to have managed with adulation and accolades" (Kahir). Khair is speaking here of the process of delegitimization. Kahir argues that Western association has segregated Malala from conservative Muslim Pakistani society and threatens to do more lasting harm to her message than any Taliban assassination attempt could (Kahir). This segregation seriously undermines Malala's educational agenda and stands in the way of any real political progress which would benefit women's education.

Rafia Zakaria, a Pakistani-American journalist and feminist author, responds to this growing rift between Malala and the majority of conservative Pakistani society in her article, "Malala the Muslim Feminist." Zakaria contrasts Malala's feminist educational platform with Holland's prominent secular feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Renowned for her controversial views opposing Islam, Hirsi Ali argues that all Muslim women are oppressed within Islam and therefore they must renounce their culture and faith in order to find true freedom. Zakaria points out that Malala, unlike Hirsi Ali, does not argue for the rejection of religion or culture but rather speaks as a Muslim for the rights of Muslim women. Therefore, according to Zakaria, Malala's message should be viewed by Pakistani Muslims as aligning with their interests, regardless of her endorsement by the West. Zakaria describes Malala's story as an inspiration for Muslim

girls across the globe and states that it is “proof that feminism, or the desire for equality through education and empowerment, is not the terrain of any one culture or faith,” but rather it is a value that has existed throughout the history of civilization (Zakaria). The claim that Zakaria makes with regards the universality of feminist terminology is the same concept that was discussed between Margo Badran and Asma Barlas. Zakaria justifies Malala’s juggling of feminism, Islam, and the West to her followers by arguing that the desire for equality between men and women is not the unique terrain of Western culture but is instead a universal phenomenon which should be in line with Pakistani interests. Thus, Malala Yousafzai’s diverse reception, ranging from harsh denunciation to beaming adulation, serves to exemplify the divisions and quarrels between Pakistani feminist groups.

### **V. The Outcomes of Feminism: Pakistan and Tunisia Compared**

Thus far, this paper has examined the feminist movement in Pakistan and explored the dialogues occurring between secular and Islamic feminists groups. What is yet to be discussed is the level of effectiveness of these feminist groups and the significance of their dialogue in creating actual change within Pakistani society. This question itself has become a dialogue between supporters and critics of Pakistani feminism. The reality is that twenty-first-century Pakistan is still an extremely difficult and dangerous place for women. This fact is undeniable, evidenced by the continual persecution faced by contemporary Pakistani feminists. The discussions that arise from this fact revolve around the question of whether or not feminist groups themselves are to blame for this lack of change.

A very critical article by Pakistani author Yasser Latif Hamdani in Pakistan’s Daily Times argued that feminists are indeed to blame for the lack of real social change in Pakistan. Hamdani’s main argument is that social change can only take place when men support women’s causes, as witnessed by the history of the global feminist movement. He argues that a fundamental shift in the status of women in Pakistan has yet to materialize because feminist groups have “foolishly” rejected the support of men in their quest for change (Hamdani). Hamdani also criticizes the divisions between Pakistani feminist groups, claiming that feminism within Pakistan can hardly be called a “movement” since it is anything but united (Hamdani). The fact that women’s action movements, such as Women’s Action Forum and Jamaat-e-Islami, cannot even agree on which sorts of rights and freedoms they should advocate for makes it difficult to establish what kind of change is necessary.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Internet community of Pakistani

feminists responded harshly towards Hamdani and his perspective on the effectiveness of women's movements. Bina Shah, a well-known Pakistani writer and author of a widely followed blog, responded to Hamdani with an article titled, "Nothing's Wrong With Pakistani Feminists." In the article, Shah highlights the progress that has been achieved over the past decade in passing pro-women legislation in Pakistan (Shah). She notes the examples of the Honour Killing Bill in March 2015, the Sexual Harassment Bill in 2010, the Domestic Violence Bill in 2013, the Acid Control Bill in 2010, and the Acid Attack Bill in 2011, all protecting women from what was previously culturally acceptable male-inflicted violence (Haider; "Zardari signs bill"; "Celebrating Milestones"; Khan). These bills were all passed due to the persistence of female legislators and women's rights groups (such as the WAF, in partnership with the Pakistan People's Party) showing that, at least on a legislative level, Pakistani feminists have affected serious, demonstrable change over the past decade.

However, despite legislative progress, Pakistani society is still overwhelmingly conservative and anti-Western. For example, on December 1, 2015, Pakistan voted against the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly which called for the recognition and protection of human rights protectors ("HRC alarmed by Pak opposition to UN resolution"). Human rights activists in Pakistan, including feminists, are in frequent danger of abuse or assassination yet Pakistani society is unwilling to protect them because of their perceived association with the West. It would appear, therefore, that pro-women legislation has not created a real cultural change in attitudes towards women, and many have argued that feminist groups have reached an impasse in their effectiveness because they work in isolation.

There is no doubt that the divide between the two main feminist camps makes social change difficult in Pakistan. However, this rift is not the only reason for the culture's lack of sympathy towards women. Chauvinism, conservatism, and misogyny are collective societal traits that have been increasing in the Arab world over the past decade with the rise of Islamism. Even in Tunisia, known as the leading country for women's rights in the Arab world, there has been an increase in societal pushback against women in recent years, much like the one experienced in Pakistan.

In the public sphere, Tunisian Shari'a allows women the right to vote, the right to hold political office, and the right to work the same jobs as men. In the private sphere, Tunisian Shari'a allows women the right to divorce, the right to abortion, and the right to inheritance. Additionally, Tunisian laws are relatively favorable to women in cases of rape. The majority of these laws stem from the

## SEREZ

1957 Code of Personal Status, a Tunisian piece of pro-women legislation passed after the nation gained its independence. This code gave women rights that they had not previously enjoyed in both the public and private spheres. These laws were extremely progressive and gave Tunisian women a sort of independence from men equal to those that were being experienced by American women in the 1950's. These rights have been codified for over sixty years, making Tunisia theoretically one of the leading countries in terms of pro-women legislation and women rights (Mashhour 584).

As can be seen in the treatment of women in Tunisia today, however,, the fact that these laws are codified does not necessarily mean they are being upheld by the ruling government. The contemporary problem that Tunisian women face is very similar to that in Pakistan. Not only is the government failing to enforce pro-women legislation, it is, in fact, hiding behind the very notion of feminism itself by publicly advocating for women's interests while actually ignoring many women's rights (Pinto). Media coverage of this issue has sparked an international feminist dialogue regarding the hypocrisy of the Tunisian government. Newspaper headlines read: "State feminism in Tunisia: reading between the lines," "Women's rights in Tunisia: promising future or religio-political game?" and "Is Tunisia the beacon of women's rights it claims to be?" These headlines reveal the startling extent to which the Tunisian government is failing to uphold its apparently pro-women legislature.

In recent years, the Ennahda Party, led by Rachid Ghannouchi, has gained a footing as an Islamist movement in Tunisia. Ghannouchi's call in 2011 for a "moderate brand of Islam" was attractive to the nation's lower class, rural population, due to the comfort and familiarity provided by religion, as seen earlier in the Pakistani context (Malkonian). However, in order to win over the upper elite class, Ghannouchi emphasized women's rights in his platform, claiming to hold dear all the progress that feminists had worked for. He succeeded in winning the vote and assumed office in 2011 just after the Tunisian Revolution that sparked the Arab Spring (Melkonian). Since then, Tunisia has seen a decline in women's security across the country. Cases of abuse against women (physical, emotional, and sexual) have increased since 2011 to such a point that nearly fifty percent of the nation's female population has experienced abuse at least once in their life (Pinto). There have been numerous attempts by women's groups to speak out against this increasing abuse and neglect of women's freedoms, but these attempts have only created further conflict between women's group in the country.

As is the case in Pakistan, ideological conflicts between Islamic and sec-

ular feminists have prevented unified resistance against the Tunisian government (“Women’s rights protest fizzles in Tunisia”). Further, class and social status play a large role in Tunisia’s politics, with class-division reinforcing the fragmentation of Tunisian feminism. As with Pakistan, Tunisia’s lower, rural class are generally more conservative and religious in their beliefs, while Tunisia’s elite are generally more liberal and secular. Instead of seeking common ground and working together to gain the attention of the government, these two groups publically undermine each other, fearful of the beliefs of the other. This process of delegitimization most commonly manifests itself as a resistance to the other faction’s protests. When secular, liberal feminists hold a rally against the government, Islamic feminists and conservative Islamic women often show up on site and protest against the protest (“Women’s rights protest fizzles in Tunisia”). The same happens during Islamic feminist rallies. This attempt by both parties to delegitimize the other has been largely successful. As the rift between Islamic and secular feminist groups grows, hostilities increase and there is less opportunity for dialogue both between the two groups and between women and the Tunisian government in general.

In the case of both Tunisia and Pakistan, if feminist groups were able to collaborate despite their differences and unify as one voice, then it would not take long to exert real pressure for change within their governments. Meherzia Labidi, one of Tunisia’s few female politicians, is a strong advocate for women in the country. She recognizes the detrimental impact of the feminist gap on Tunisian women and, therefore, calls for unity between parties in order to achieve social change. She challenges Tunisian feminists to put aside their differences, declaring that, “we have to meet in a mutual aim which is improving women’s rights... My daughters are not veiled. Shall we divide the house? Of course not! There is a place for me and for them; this is how I see women in Tunisian society” (Labidi qtd. in El Amraoui and Kalboussi). Labidi’s exhortation attests to the fact that at least some political figures are trying to affect change, but she cannot do it alone. She and her fellow government officials cannot work to improve the condition for women while feminist groups perpetuate infighting amongst themselves. In order for women in Tunisia and Pakistan to achieve the change they seek, they must present a unified front; they must open the door to dialogue by respecting each other’s similarities as well as differences. This exchange will lead to a stronger affinity between women and foster socio-political change.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The secular and Islamic feminist movements in Pakistan, like in Tunisia, have been partially successful in bringing about legislative change that favours women's rights. The lack of unity between the two major feminist groups, however, has hindered true social change. Dialogue between these two groups has been hostile and competitive, since each group attempts to delegitimize the other in order to promote its own agendas. In practice, this infighting serves only to delegitimize the feminist movement itself. Therefore, in order for dialogue between Pakistani feminists to be effective, both secular and Islamic women's groups must acknowledge and work towards what unites them, rather than what divides them. It is time for Pakistani feminists to look beyond their "sectarian" differences and work together to secure rights for all women in Pakistan – regardless of religion or social status. Only then will Pakistan see meaningful, lasting change in the lives of its women.

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