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# Listen to This Silence: Women in Higher Education in Pakistan

Anniqua Rana

A Bit of Advice

If  
in the course of a conversation  
gaps of silence begin  
to occur,  
spoken words turn silent;  
therefore, my eloquent  
friend,  
let's carefully listen  
to this silence.

—Parveen Shakir (Pakistani poet)

## Abstract

Pakistan has a fairly short history of just over 50 years, becoming independent from British colonial rule in 1947. It shares a much older history with India; however their recent relationship has been turbulent because of disputes over the territory of Kashmir. Despite this, the country has made some economic progress. The education system, however, has not reflected this progress. This is obvious not only in the overall educational indicators, but also in the education of women. Because of religious and cultural practices, women have not been involved in mainstream activities outside of home life. This essay traces the historical background of the feminist movement among Muslims in India, which influenced the women of Pakistan, a nation created for the Muslim majority of India. This is followed by a brief background of higher education in Pakistan, concluding with recommendations about the need for women to become influential in the system, to effect change in the education system by encouraging the

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involvement of women in positions of authority and policy-making in higher education. The inspiration for this essay, “A Bit of Advice” by Shakir, a Pakistani female poet, refers to the silence of women of Pakistan in higher education due to the lack of opportunities available to them and the need for their inclusion in the dialogue for change.

At a 2-day training workshop entitled Women in Higher Education Management at Bahauddin Zakaria University, Multan, in April 2003, attendees included 10 women from Bahauddin Zakaria University, five from Islamia University, and four from Agriculture University. Three areas in higher education management were addressed during this workshop, designed to provide fundamental concepts to support women developing management skills in the Pakistani higher education system. To analyze their personal experiences in the cultural context, the women discussed balancing personal and professional roles. In another workshop focusing on academic leadership in higher education, Najam, the only woman Vice Chancellor of Fatima Jinnah University for women, discussed leadership styles in higher education organizations from the perspective of women’s experiences in their changing social realities. Examining the language and metaphors of leadership, Najam demonstrated that our leadership metaphors are steeped in stereotypical gender roles and need to be modified. Dr. Najam highlighted the extraordinary drive and ability of female leaders to communicate in the university community, stressing that a person is both changed by, and importantly, able to change the social context within which she works. This kind of workshop is fairly new in the field of higher education in Pakistan and even more impressive in advocating for the advancement of women in this country.

Considering Article 34 of the Constitution of Pakistan, which states “Steps shall be taken to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of national life,” it would seem that Pakistan is making marked progress to ensure the full participation of women in every sphere of life: The first democratically elected woman leader of the Muslim world was Bhutto, and currently Jalal, a female appointee,

is the Federal Minister of Education. In contrast, only 29.7% of adult women are literate compared to 53% of men. There is only one female vice chancellor of the 23 public universities in the country. For most of the country's short history, the disparity between the education of girls and boys at the primary level in Pakistan has been and still is discouraging. Even though efforts have been made on the international, national, and grassroots levels through nongovernmental organizations to ensure equity, little progress has been made in the quantity and the quality of girls' education at the primary level. This disparity is unreasonable because education for all has been stressed since Pakistan's inception in 1947. Later the commission on national education in 1959 called for universal and compulsory education, with an emphasis on the education of women because of the positive impact it would have on the country. This stress on universal education has had little success. As Easterly (2001) wrote, "there have been many education 'reforms and commissions on reform' (by one account there were 11 national education commissions between 1947 and 1993), but education has remained 'unabashedly elitist'" (pp. 18–19).

Beginning with a historical and sociocultural investigation of women and education, followed by an in-depth study of reforms to implement equality and equity for women in education and the processes by which they have been carried out, and concluding with an assessment of the of these reforms would reveal why the numbers of women in Pakistani education do not add up after more than 50 years. A comparative assessment of women's success in education in other regions could lead to suggestions about how needs could and should be met.

To understand the situation of women in Pakistan, I provide a macrovision of the disparity between the economic indicators of the country, contrasted with the investment in human capital. Pakistan underperforms "on most social and political indicators—education, health, sanitation, fertility, gender equality, corruption, political instability and violence and democracy—for its level of income" (Easterly, 2001, p. 1). Easterly referenced this underperformance as

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“growth without development.” The two political-economy models used to explain this disparity are “the incentives of the elite under high inequality to under-invest in the human capital of the majority” and the “ethnic divisions” that intensify this disparity. This essay focuses on the former of the two models:

A variant of “the elite keeping the masses uneducated so as to keep power” hypothesis is that the male elite in a highly patriarchal society are reluctant to invest in women’s education, since that is likely to lead to demand by women for increased power and equality. (Easterly, 2001, p. 24)

Considering financial assistance from foreign organizations and governments and the various government development programs, one could speculate on the factors that can effect change. Can outside models prove to be influential, or does change depend on internal transformation? Also, why would those in power want to jeopardize their position by empowering the majority by educating them to demand democratic equity in health and education? As indicated by Easterly’s (2001, p. 1, para. 1) study, the ethnic divisions identified as intensifiers of disparity can only be eradicated from within. This would only be possible if drastic measures are initiated from the various ethnicities. Similarly, because the women of Pakistan have a culture, history, and identity that is inherent to their lives, the change needs to come from them.

If the patriarchal society elite have no incentive to invest in women’s human capital, effective change will not arrive until women work to end the silence of inequality; and the major contributor to end this silence should be the women of Pakistan. Ironically, to be able to effectively contribute to the changes needed in the education of women, and to speak out for a change in power, one needs the language of the elite. Women have to be involved in policymaking to transform the system. Because the system does not work for women, it has to be transformed to allow the success of women. They have to speak out and become contributors in the dialogue of policy and

decision making. This can only be possible if women are empowered in academies of higher education.

### **An Overview of Higher Education in Pakistan**

According to Rahman (2004), the foundation for the current system of higher education in Pakistan can be traced back to 1857, when the Directors of the East India Company decided to set up universities in India. They were deliberately established as not too challenging so as not to discourage the students. One major reason was to educate local citizens who would be able to work in the bureaucracy at lower-level government jobs. There was a need to Westernize and educate Indians sufficiently to fulfill these minor responsibilities. These institutions were not supposed to equal the academics of Oxford or Cambridge, which were autonomous institutions. It was necessary, for British colonialists, that the University of Calcutta not be governed by academics; so the governor general was the chancellor and the chief justice of the supreme court was the vice chancellor. The whole was mainly a concern of men; women were not involved. The mentality of subordination, however, imbued South Asian higher education institutions because of this colonial mentality. Although institutions like Aligarh University were created by native Indians, they were fashioned in the Western model to ensure success of students in the British colonial system.

Universities in the subcontinent, for the most part, retained their colonial characteristics (Rahman, 2004). Even after 1947, with the partition of India and the departure of the British, institutions of higher education retained their nonautonomous characteristics. The chancellor and vice chancellor for provincial universities are both appointees of the governor of the province. Finances are controlled through the University Grants Commission, established in 1974. "The powerlessness of the academic, which the colonial bureaucracy had ensured, has only increased in the half century of Pakistan's existence" (Rahman, 2004, p. 111).

The number of universities has been increasing, despite of the lack of funding and autonomy. In 1947, there was only one university,

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University of the Punjab in Lahore, but by 2003 there were 53 public universities. Many private universities were established after 1987. The only two that have achieved international status are Lahore University of Management Sciences and Agha Khan University of Karachi. Both receive large subsidies from the government.

Not much has been written about the role of women in institutions of higher education in the region. In this extremely restrained academic environment and considering the country's patriarchal cultural setup, the response of female academicians would be extremely revealing. Rahman (2004) mentioned the shortcomings of his own analysis of institutions of higher education in Pakistan when discussing gender issues:

Females are represented in very low numbers. They are more reluctant to complete questionnaires and also more difficult to access than their male colleagues. Another problem is that women do not work as faculty of private universities; most of them are employed by the public sector and deliver lectures at private universities. (p. 143)

This apparently intentional silence of the women is noteworthy. Why do they not speak out? Do they feel they might jeopardize their positions or do they feel that their contribution will go unheard?

### **Comparative Data**

In 1998, when the United Nations report was compiled, there was only one woman vice chancellor in Pakistan (of the newly established Fatimah Jinnah Women's University). Recently, changes have been made and other women's institutions, such as Lahore College for Women, have been given university status, but the disparity of women in decision-making positions in higher education is unmitigated. Again according to the 1998 report by the United Nations, women lecturers were also underrepresented in Pakistani institutions. In this area, Pakistan (16%) joins countries like Uganda (18%), Nigeria (17.0%),

Zimbabwe (10.8%), Tanzania (10.7%) and Zambia (10.2%) with a lower percentage of women lecturers compared to other newly emerging countries like Malaysia which had 34.5%, South Pacific 33.9%, Sri Lanka 35.5%, and India 36.8%. Researchers should investigate if this situation has changed in the last 15 years.

At the lower rungs of education, the situation is also not encouraging for the women of Pakistan. The decline in the literacy level of women with respect to the growing GDP of the country reflects a decline in the quality of life for women, despite economic growth (Easterly, 2001). Also, considering the correlation between the education of the mother and the life expectancy and education of the child, the decline in the literacy level is likely to have an overall negative effect on the women and children in Pakistan. To quote Easterly:

Pakistan already had higher female illiteracy at the same initial income level as the control group (the starting point for this data is 1970). Over the next three decades, income grew more in Pakistan, but female illiteracy improved less. ... The moderate growth control group achieved a reduction of female illiteracy of about 60 percent, while the same amount of growth in Pakistan yielded a decline in female illiteracy of about 20 percent. The gap between female and male illiteracy actually increased with rising per capita income in Pakistan, while it declined sharply in other comparably growing countries. (2001, p. 14)

These statistics indicate a need for a complete societal transformation.

Even though ideas can be imported, they cannot be implemented without being adjusted to the society. It is the individuals in the society who can effectively identify the areas that need transformation. More women need to be involved in decision making and policymaking to ensure the failures of the last 50 years do not repeat themselves. The failures are “consistent with one of an educated elite who do not wish to invest in the human capital of the majority” (Easterly, 2001, p. 12).

### **Economics of Education**

Some landmarks in Pakistani educational policy are the Education Conference, 1947; The Commission on National Education, 1959; The New Education Policy, 1970; The Education Policy, 1972; The National Education Policy, 1979; The National Educational Policy, 1992; The National Education Policy, 1998–2010; and Education Sector Reforms: Strategic Plan 2001–2004. All these reforms stressed literacy levels and primary education, and did not focus on tertiary education. A more recent study compiled by the National Institution of Policy and Administration affirmed, “there should be equitable representation of women in the corridors of power and policy making in the higher educational institutions” (Malik, 2003, p. 52).

Appointing women to posts of power and policymaking is one way to accomplish this goal, but it is not the most effective means. In the context of left feminist recommendations, curriculum and pedagogy supporting a capitalist society and reinforcing roles of dominance and subordination need to be changed. The Freirian concept of “banking” information and education needs to be transformed so that women can be empowered to become agents of change. The “dialogic” model (Freirian concept) encourages less authoritarianism and more interaction, advocating student experience as content and as a basis for problem solving. For women to effect change in higher education, and education in general, there need to be, “models of liberators, strugglers for social justice and women engaged in collective (as opposed to individual) action” (Perreault, 1993, p. 290).

An internal Pakistani government study focused on the relationship between the country’s economy and higher education, compiled through the auspices of its National Institution of Policy and Administration. It emphasized the correlation between “economy of the country and higher education.” No doubt, the connection between education and the economy is indisputable, but, as Easterly noted, economic progress does not necessarily correlate with human capital, leading to a system wherein Pakistan may underperform on many sociological and political indicators as previously noted of Easterly’s work earlier

in this essay. If the privatization of higher education continues on an international level and states continue to assume higher education as a “private good” rather than “public good,” chances for women and ethnic minorities to succeed in higher education in Pakistan will be even more scarce. Also, if private institutions receive higher autonomy and thus reduced state support, economic competition will increase. The fear remains that the growing number of private institutions of higher education might adversely affect the political economy of institutions worldwide, especially if the aim of these institutions is to increase economic gains rather than the public good. This researcher suggests that more information is needed to ascertain the voices of women in higher education from a global perspective.

Granting autonomy to educational institutions and giving them academic freedom is of the utmost importance to the success of relevant curricula, and even though private institutions may improve the finances of the country, to what extent will there be an incentive to decrease the “inequality ... [of] human capital of the majority” (Easterly, 2001, p. 12).

### **Conclusion**

Will the landscape change for Pakistani women in higher education? Will they be the main agents of change? If they speak out and end the silence, it will be a promising beginning.

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