

Empowering the Disempowered: Contesting Masculinities and Tradition

Najia Asrar Zaidi

Saima Manzoor

English Department
University of Balochistan
Pakistan

Abstract

This paper aims to examine and analyze how socio-cultural and economic factors exercise control over woman's body and mind. Historically, men have always been the producers, interpreters and perpetrators of knowledge. The situation of women in Balochistan is dismal and painful. Their bodies are subordinated to the institution of marriage and motherhood. This system creates a social structure where men possess power and women are reduced to the level of object made for recreation and reproduction. Poverty, lack of resources, joint family system, contentious traditions and no freedom to take decision regarding their body deeply affects the cultural positioning of women which needs to be addressed immediately. The paper concludes that decision-making should not remain the exclusive right of male member of the family only. Collectively, the government, academia, welfare organizations, hospitals, sociologists, society and the family should work together to transform people's perception of woman's role on social, cultural and economic front.

Keywords: Women, Body, Balochistan, tradition, transform perceptions, knowledge, and empowerment.

Introduction

Balochistan, the largest province of Pakistan is unfortunately the least developed of all. Governments make tall claims regarding the development of the province but they rarely take interest in its development. The province that serves the whole country with gas supply itself remains without fuel. The service sectors of health, education, population, and development suffer considerably due to the corruption of the officials, lack of accountability and negligence of higher-ups. Women situation also suffers on the same lines. In traditional societies women live a vulnerable life and Baluchistan is one of them.

The armed conflict involving some Baloch groups since Sardar Bugti's assassination in 2006 further led to oppression and subordination of women. The disturbed socio/political situation in last ten years has pushed women into desperate situation. Since, 1980's and 90's issues concerning women subordination, low status, have been highlighted by writers, civil society and researchers forcefully. In Pakistan- family is the site where women should have the authority to display power, and dignity. Unfortunately, family at times become the source of woman's exploitation. According to Kumar and Nagi "In Pakistani families, hierarchical structure, women have a weaker role in decision making, lose control over resources and restrictions on their physical mobility (2009).

For development of a country gender equality in the economic, social, political spheres is a must. The rural poverty survey of 2013 reports, " Women's condition are evident by their fewer asset holdings, restricted moneymaking opportunities and a reduced rights to use social services such as education and health facilities (80).

The objectives of this paper are,

To discuss socio/political constraints that keep women suppressed and restricted.

To discuss the status of women from Balochistan in their households

To probe the perceptions of the society (men and women) regarding major decisions of women

Finally, suggest recommendations.

Discussion

This paper aims to analyze socio/cultural constraints that hamper women development in Balochistan. Women in South-Asian countries continue to suffer due to biological essentialism indoctrinated into the societal set-up that is strictly patriarchal in nature. Commenting on this situation Zaidi (2012:213) writes, “Pakistan though a post-colonial society is structurally tribalistic and feudalistic to its core. The dominance of these structures at a socio/political level weakens the position of women in the society by empowering men in all spheres of life”. Historically speaking, female body had always existed on the margins of the social scene be it East or West. Cultural studies, Sociology, social theory, women studies and philosophical studies (including feminism) have brought female body into an academic discourse that has gained prominence with publications on women and women issues. Societies in the East and West imagine, portray and depict “female body” according to their obsessions, outlook and nature of power relations. The Western preoccupation with female body has worked to popularize certain body types in the society and culture. The ideal female body has to remain fit, thin, slim, adorable forever. Such bodies are advertized on media to promote sale of certain products in order to create need in the market and run business based on certain tenets of consumerism. The discourses forwarded by media, and certain academics deprive people of mental health and peace as the race against time continues.

In South Asian countries household chores remain the center of women’s activities whereas; public sphere and politics keep men engaged. As per societal norms male members are expected to show strength by making decisions in both domains. This is the case in most of the underdeveloped countries. In this context Rizvi (1980:4) states, “In most underdeveloped countries of the world woman as a girl-child has a lower status and enjoys fewer rights, opportunities and benefits of the childhood than the boy-child. Women at very young experience inequality and find it very difficult to overcome this equality.” Supporting this statement Jalal-ud-din & Khan (2008:485) affirm “As a result the girls-child receives less food, less access to education and less health care than a male child and are more likely to die of childhood diseases”. The situation is no different in Balochistan.

Continuing the discourse on ‘Female body’ it is pertinent here to quote Robert and Fredricson (1997:88) who observe that women’s experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others; and conclude that such objectification works to diminish women’s well-being and limit their potential”. The interest in female body takes a different turn in the Pakistan context. This interest affects female body at two levels. (a) Knowledge is interpreted according to the interests of patriarchy in order to establish male supremacy. Secondly, traditions are honoured and symbolised as sacred to facilitate women’s victimization. Zine (2006:10) in her article discusses that women in Pakistan continue to be disciplined and regulated by tradition, religion and state authority. Zaidi (2015:17) also endorses this view, “tradition and manipulation of religious dogmas along with essentialist construction of women as a lower species, give patriarchal structures fertile ground for positioning women as the other in their respective societies”.

The female body is then defined as a body that needs surveillance and control since it cannot exercise rational thinking. This thinking leads to objectification of woman’s body. Such values are practiced more religiously and devoutly in Balochistan. Norm and values are formulated and propagated by patriarchy. Simone De Beauvoir in her widely acclaimed text ‘The Second Sex’ writes, “Representation of the world like the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth (1993:175). Women then live according to the social rules of the society. From the very beginning, she is excluded from eminence. Jala-ud-din and Khan (2008:485) state, “The girl is a liability. At an early age the girl-child is made aware that she is only a temporary member of the family. Any skills she learns will benefit not her own family but in-laws”. . Shockingly, Balochistan has lowest Literacy rate in Pakistan. Shah reports in Dawn (2014) “Female literacy rate hits new low in Balochistan. The Statistics paint a bleak picture, with less than 2 % rural women educated and only 26% overall female literacy in the Province”. These numbers are sufficient to give an idea of the social identity of women in the area. Naqvi and Ibrar (2015:88) found that “education can make situation better for women”. This study also found that the opinion of a female in her marriage is not acceptable in their family. Only education could create awareness amongst the masses about their rights and privileges as enjoined in the constitution of the country and religion (Islam).

The status of women worsens at marriage when her consent is not taken for the selection of her life partner. The institution of marriage imposes restriction with draconian measures. Sharing their findings Naqvi and Ibrar (2015) found that the opinion of a female in her marriage is not acceptable in their family. Woman is advised to remain subservient to her husband and family. Female body is considered fit only to procreate a child.

In conservative societies a “Woman’s body is sacred” and therefore needs guarding and protection. The decisions regarding her mobility are also made by the husband and his family. As far as reproductive health is concerned, the desired family size is highest in Baluchistan. It is 6.1 for women and 7.1 for men (Express Tribune, 2015). They also do not have access to health facilities. A woman receiving antenatal care is only 30%. (The Tribune 2015). Furthermore, skilled assistance at birth of a baby is only 18%. (Tribune, 2015). Traditional methods are used for delivering a baby. Such methods may damage a woman’s health.

Domestic violence is also a serious issue for the women in the area. Ironically, women are likely to agree that wife beating is justified if a woman argues with her husband. Wife beating is also justified if she goes out without informing him. According to Naqvi and Ibrar (2015) mostly respondents believe that men should be given a privileged status because they have a superior position and that the husband is responsible for deciding and planning the future of the children. Woman’s decision-making in the areas of health, visit to family and household chores is 18% only (PHPS, 2013). A small percentage of women know about their rights. The society (from Balochistan) is patriarchal and socio/cultural factors further complicate the situation for women. These factors assign higher social power, reward and control to men and impose a certain code of behavior on women. They are being assigned the tasks of food preparation, child-rearing, cleaning, washing clothes, assisting the elderly in the family, and fetching water from the well on routine basis. Their intellectual and spiritual enhancement is entirely neglected. This system of male supremacy needs immediate attention. It is important to combat tradition, systemic patriarchal violence, prejudices, and anti- women practices that deeply affect her life and suppress her thinking skills.

Recommendations:

- Researchers conducting studies on women in various parts of Pakistan suggest that media should continue to play an important role in creating awareness about women’s right as enshrined in religion and constitution (Omer and Jabeen, 2015).
- Provincial Government should create policy development department working exclusively for the uplift of women in this area.
- Ensuring better educational facilities for women is vital for their development (Jalal-ud-din and Khan, 2008), (Hameed, Azmat, Bilgrmai, Ishaque, 2011), (Kakar, Khilji, Zafarullah, 2011). Initiate dialogue with the elders in the area to convince them about the rights and education of women. Negotiate with tribal leaders to change their mind-sets and values relating women’s rights.
- Providing economic opportunities to women should also empower them in decision making. (Moyhuddin, Chaudhry and Ambereen, 2012).
- Take help from masjid (mosque) and madressah’s to enlighten people and popularize slogans like “women rights are human rights”. “We respect women’s rights so did Mohammad (May peace be upon Him)”“Men of quality believe in women’s equality”
- Finally, to campaign vigorously against illiteracy, tribal values and tradition.

Conclusion

More studies need to be conducted on women from Baluchistan. It is expected that research could help form strategies to cope with gender biases and violence that surround the life of women. The weak socio/cultural and economic status of the women hurt them the most and leaves them at the mercy of the male members of the family, who remain insensitive to their care and development. These recommendations would develop their survival skills helping them get rid of social powerlessness that deprives them of due respectable status and dignity. Women’s empowerment according to the United Nations has five components i.e their sense of self-worth, the rights to have and make choices, the right to have access to opportunities and resources, their right to have the power to control their own body within and outside the home and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (Naqvi & Ibrar 2015:79) Creating awareness in women about their rights would empower them and the incorporation of these components in the lives of women could ignite in them the flame of ‘self-esteem’ to combat this learned helplessness.

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