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he social, political and historical context of each previous form of feminism was different

and the feminist issues of each era arose from particular moments in national and global histories. In the early years of Pakistan's formation, the wounds inflicted by the bloodstained Partition were fresh. Women activists were focused on welfare issues, such as the rehabilitation of refugees, because that kind of work had social respectability within the traditional cultural milieu.

Pakistan also inherited many social issues – such as polygamy, purdah, child marriage, inheritance, divorce and the right to education – from the pre-Partition times. Many of the demands for social and legal reforms on these issues were acceptable even within the bounds of religion. So, there was no fear of women upsetting the applecart when they asked for these reforms.

The 1960s saw the proliferation of women's welfare and development organizations but it was the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) that became the face of the women's movement in the country in that decade. The passage of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, pushed by APWA, reflected a minor ingress by the state in the private sphere as it placed certain procedural limits on the men's arbitrary right of divorce and gave women some rights regarding child custody and maintenance. Even the small changes repeatedly stirred public controversy with clerics clamoring for the reversal of the ordinance.

APWA's approach was characterized by two salient features: one, the focus on social welfare and development work involving girls' education and income-generation activities; two, the collaboration with the state to achieve its aims. APWA shied away from an overtly political position in that it did not contest dictatorship. It did not ruffle any religious or political feathers and preferred to play it safe even when Fatima Jinnah, a woman, remained the sole campaigner against dictatorship. The cooperation and collaboration of women leaders with the state to attain women's rights continued during the civilian rule of the Pakistan Peoples Party (1971-1977).

The feminist movement and the women's rights struggle that arose in the 1980s, spearheaded by Women's Action Forum (WAF) in the urban areas and Sindhiani Tehreek in rural Sindh, were significant for their overtly political stance. As both these movements were formed in the context

of a hyper nationalist absolute dictatorship that relied on a particular version of religion for legitimacy, they consistently challenged both the military rule and the incursion of religion in politics. WAF struggled for a democratic, inclusive, plural and secular state while Sindhiani Tehreek strove for an end to feudalism and patriarchy, sought the restoration of democracy and championed the principle of federalism and provincial autonomy.

These movements represent a significant break from the former paradigm of collaboration and cooperation with the state. They challenged patriarchal power in every domain — political, religious and legal. Unlike the welfare and social uplift-oriented movements of the 1960s, the struggles launched by women in the 1980s were essentially political movements anchored in the ideas of democracy, basic rights and sociopolitical change. As they confronted the authoritarian state, women in these movements could ill-afford to play it safe like their predecessors. They, therefore, engaged in frequent street protests and demonstrations. They took risks and were occasionally beaten, jailed, baton-charged and otherwise threatened by the dominant religious-military patriarchies of the time.

WAF had to respond quickly and frequently because of the rapid pace at which the regime was promulgating discriminatory laws and taking anti-women measures. The focus of the WAF members was squarely on the public sphere where the state machinery was utilized to brutally repress anyone who dared to stand up to the dictatorship. The aggressive and intrusive reconstitution of the private sphere, through instruments such as the Hudood Ordinances, had to be resisted at the public level by fighting legal cases, speaking up and protesting on the street.

Given the dizzying pace at which the regime and its religious allies had to be countered, there was little room for internal reflection in WAF. Although most of its founders had a strong feminist background and a feminist lens for unpacking the dominant narratives, the space for interrogating private life had shrunk. WAF members knew that patriarchies work through the bodies of women and write their strictures on those bodies. They also understood that the traditional family, which controls and organizes the human body and sexuality, is the mainstay of patriarchies. Yet they were constantly occupied with contesting the state's laws being drawn from a singular interpretation of religion. In private conversations, the politics of the body in the body politic were often discussed but, publicly, WAF was only engaged in countering the imperious state.

Some of the reasons for the reticence were internal. WAF was composed of a diverse set of organizations and individuals with differing perspectives on religion, culture and tradition. This diversity grew out of the necessity to have maximum numbers to confront a heavy-handed regime. WAF was reluctant to take too radical a stand on the body, sexuality and the family as many of its members were religious, conservative and deeply embedded in traditional family systems. The conversations on the body, sexuality and the freedom to express oneself in one's own way did not become a part of the official public agenda of WAF.

Ironically, while WAF members avoided public discussions on the body and sexuality, the state and religious clerics had no such qualms; their focus was squarely on the woman's body — the need to conceal it, cover it, protect it and preserve it for its rightful 'owner'. The state was consistently referring to sexuality (for example, in laws on fornication, zina), the veil and the four walls of the house — all designed to control the rebellious and potentially dangerous female body capable of irredeemable transgression.

This is where the new feminists break from the older generation and mark a powerful shift in the feminist landscape. Even as new feminism retains many of the older critiques of the state, fundamentalism and militarism and reflects the desire for equality and democracy, it reaffirms the personal and injects it right into the heart of the political. 'My body, my will', it tells patriarchy to its crestfallen face. 'Warm your own food', 'I don't have to warm your bed', 'don't send me dick pics' — in curt one-liners, the new young feminists reclaim their bodies, denounce sexual harassment, stake a claim to public space and challenge the gender division of labour on which rests the entire edifice of patriarchy.

The new wave of feminism includes people from all classes, genders, religions, cultures and sects without any discrimination or prejudice. The young feminists are diverse, yet inclusive, multiple yet one. There are no leaders or followers — they are all leaders and followers. The collective non-hierarchical manner of working and the refusal to take any funding is similar to the functioning practiced by WAF and represents continuity with the past. But the entire framing of the narrative around the body, sexuality, personal choices and rights is new. The young groups of women say openly what their grandmothers could not dare to think and their mothers could not dare to speak.

They say what women have known for centuries but have not been able to voice. They have broken the silences imposed by various patriarchies in the name of religion, tradition and culture. They have torn down so many false barriers including the four walls of morality built to stifle their selves and curb their expression.

The backlash has been swift, fierce and expected. Patriarchy began to shake in its boots and masculine anxiety reached a peak as women hit it where it hurt. The self-appointed guardians of morality, who in the past never touched the issues of violence and inequality, have been quick to condemn the marching women in their television chatter shows, puny little newspaper columns and silly tweets. The blowback from little people is not new for feminists.

The critics certainly cannot stop the marchers. Will money hinder their path? There are questions about the sustainability of the feminist movement given that the young feminists do not take any funding from corporate, government or foreign donors. The tremendous energy and passion generated by the march, however, are enough to ensure that these activists will continue marching into unknown but exciting futures.