



## **Weakness as power** **By** **Hajrah Mumtaz**

This country's record regarding its treatment of women is so shockingly abysmal that on occasion, talk of 'women's rights' seems to me to be based on a somewhat mistaken premise. As in, give us the right to a life, first, and then we can start talking about finer points such as a life lived in dignity, the right to education and other important choices and freedoms.

Not an argument that will make me popular, I know. But consider: the newspapers in Pakistan are flooded with stories every day of women raped and murdered, mutilated and burned, appendages cut off and traded to settle disputes. The question of our rights as women sometimes seems to me of slightly less significance than our rights as humans.

And yet, such a place of contradictions is the world that if you're lucky enough to be born in that fraction of an elite that is not likely to have to contend with the above mentioned evils, then there are advantages to being female. Few, admittedly, but they are there. They mainly serve to smooth the little bumps of life, as opposed to the major ones, but there is some solace to be found.

Thus, even in a place as misogynist and patriarchal as Pakistan, there are certain notions of chivalry, and subsequent rules of behaviour, that hold true. (It has been argued, in fact, that the very concept of chivalry, rooted as it is in the medieval concept of the honour code for the perfect knight, is patriarchal: women are worthy of protection because they are more vulnerable.)

In Pakistan, female drivers are less likely to get pulled over. This, I would conjecture, is partly because there are far fewer female drivers on the roads than male, and partly because many of them tend to be more timid behind the wheel. But it's also, as the only traffic policeman I personally know told me, because women are liable to either arguing pointlessly or, worst of all, bursting into tears. Out of the weakness of being female, then, there is a curious dimension of power too.

Weakness as a weapon is well-documented. With regards to women in post-revolution Iran, there are a number of anthropological research works that argue that in some ways women found power in the need to be with a mehram or similar restrictions. Because you need the man with you to go and have an official document made, for example, you wield a recursive power over him in controlling his movement.

A sop, you'll say, and you'd be right. But it's better than nothing. As I said in the beginning, the advantages to being female are not of the stop-the-press variety. In some areas, after you rise above a certain point, gender becomes inconsequential. One could argue, for example, that it's interesting that Pakistan is one of the relatively few countries in the world to have had a woman rise to the position of prime minister, and that too nearly three decades ago when the world was not as equal as it is now.

In Benazir's case, the fact of being the daughter of Z.A. Bhutto was of greater consequence than the fact of being female (though it must be noted that women in Pakistan's political landscape often complain of having to contend with high levels of entrenched sexism and superciliousness).

If you're lucky enough to be in that fraction of Pakistani society for whom journalism and the media are options, then being female will not hold you back — less than elsewhere, I would argue. In a 1999 essay, UK columnist Petronella Wyatt noted that while the demand for women in journalism was increasing rapidly, there is a tendency to fit them in the 'softer', more frou-frou areas such as features, fashion and so on.

Zoe Heller, another prominent features' writer and columnist, categorised what she called the "ghetto of women's writing": the good humoured 'home front' column about home and kids, the stern comment piece in which public affairs are examined from an "admonitory, feminist point of view" and the "daffy 'girl' piece". The danger in writing 'as a woman', according to Heller, is that "you are required to pretend that your femaleness is all — that every one of your opinions is refracted through the lens of gender".

Obviously, women have reached the highest of positions in the media across the world, and in areas of work that were traditionally male-dominated. But Dorothy Thompson, who interviewed Hitler, was also persuaded to write on domestic matters for the Ladies' Home Journal.

In my experience in Pakistan, though, this is less of a problem (though it seems to be changing now with the electronic media).

The majority of the women I have met in journalism here say that there is little additional pressure on them from their organisations and editors to write ‘as women’ — though some areas, such as crime reporting, are by their nature in Pakistan a bit difficult for women to tackle. Many have said, in fact, that being female can be an advantage. “The men don’t expect you to have a brain, so you can get through their defences”, one such woman who rose to the top told me.

This syndrome is also noted by Daily Mail reporter Ann Leslie. Writing at the turn of the century: “I have worked in around 70 countries so far — covering wars, famines, civil and social collapse — and on the whole have found that, contrary to expectation, my gender had proved to be no disadvantage at all.”

“Harmless bird-brain behaviour” alternating with “Daughter-of-the-Raj imperiousness” are two important tools in the female ‘firemen’s’ armoury, she writes. “So effective is the former that I have found that assorted thugs round the world will become oddly protective. ... Is this manipulative behaviour immoral? Perhaps it is. But it usually gets results.”

Why is it, then, that in Pakistan’s newspaper industry there are generally more women in the magazines than on the news side?

Given that female journalists have shined in the hard news side, and the general lack of pressure by the bosses, why do most of us choose to be on the ‘softer’ side. There are answers to be found in varying deadline pressures, workloads, the home-work life balancing act and so on, but also, it could be that women are limiting themselves.

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