

Editor's Note: The following essay by a Pakistani woman university professor details the extreme sex-based discrimination she faced in her country. As readers will learn, after the US evacuation of Afghanistan, threats from the Pakistan Taliban forced her and her family to leave the country for their safety. At the author's request, we are publishing the article anonymously out of concern for retaliation against her family members still living in Pakistan.

The Problem That Has No Name

By Anonymous

Being born and growing up in a patriarchal culture is never easy. Gender inequality is inherent in my culture and begins with the birth of a female child that is unwanted and comes to this world against the wishes of parents for a male offspring.

In a patriarchal society there is an interplay of culture, religion, and law that always restricts women's rights. For example, the Islamic religion and Pakistani legal system clearly specify the laws of inheritance for women, but culturally, Pakistani females never receive their inheritances. No woman contests because the culture and social norms bar women from that right.

Similarly, there are harassment laws, but nobody has ever been convicted of harassment in the country. People usually cite Islamic rules that a woman's place is inside the four walls of a house. In my country, most households are poor and live in very small homes. There is a dearth of safe parks and recreational activities for women. In August 2022, Muslim clerics protested in demonstrations and banned the only park in Bannu District (located in Northwest Pakistan with a population of 1.21 million) for women and families. According to an August 22, 2022 story from Pakistani newspaper *The Express Tribune*, "The protesters said that thousands of couples visited the park on August 14 which is against local traditions. They added that such parks promoted vulgarity."

The news further stated that "One family park was established . . . and opened for the general public a year ago, raising eyebrows and inviting criticism from ultra-conservative circles. On Independence Day, however, when thousands of couples visited the park, this created resentment among local clerics". The incident shows how women are denied basic recreational facilities even when they are with their families.

Another example is that Islam and Pakistani law give a woman the right to divorce if she wants. But divorced women face immense rejection and negativity in that culture and so most of these women stay in unwanted marriages.

Feeling, experiencing, and fighting inequalities is a lifelong story of almost every woman born in Pakistan including me. The essay that follows is about my experiences in joining the Pakistani workplace, including certain situations I faced and beliefs and feelings I developed about myself and as a woman, the value of my work.

I was very excited when I began my job as a university professor two and a half years ago because my higher degree, with added experience in my profession, had given me confidence and belief that my work would be valuable and beneficial to the organization. Moreover, I liked the position because it was prestigious and included a good salary. The university where I worked was initially started in my district as a sub-campus of another university. Later, it was officially given the status of an independent university. Currently, the university hosts 2,000 students, of whom around 15 percent are women. Until leaving the university in December 2022, I was the only female faculty member since the university's inception, and there were no

other female faculty or staff.

I had a good relationship with my colleagues; the entire system was run by males, but everything seemed fine. When I assumed leadership positions, though, because of the system, things took a turn for the worst.

In the beginning, all my activities and tasks were subordinated by a male. I faced situations that changed my life's perspective, making me realize that women's ideas, work, and authority were ignored from head to toe in a culture like mine. I temporarily forgot that women came into the workplace as a result of World War II, proving women are as capable of excelling at office work as men.

Accepting a woman as the leader was unacceptable or disgraceful for most men in my culture, and also in the university. For instance, when I was appointed as the Head of the Department (HoD) of English, faculty members of other departments laughed and joked in a social media group for male faculty that my colleagues were made to work for a woman HoD.

At one point, I was appointed as the HoD of Education, where I was teaching. Suddenly, my colleagues hesitated, and they distanced themselves from me. The general response to my leadership role from all those colleagues—with whom I had worked before and had friendly relationships—was similar to "Who are you? We don't know you."

They totally detached themselves from me. Their first step was to stop abiding by any existing prior rules. For example, the previous male HoD was responsible for enforcing an attendance reporting system. All faculty of the department would go to the HoD's office and record attendance by signing a paper in a designated file. When I became the HoD of Education, everybody stopped following that ritual without any discussion or information.

Whenever I called a meeting of the department faculty, my colleagues hesitated to join me in my office, so I used to go to any one of my male colleague's offices,

and call everyone there, and conduct the meeting. It was very clear to me that their egos did not accept that they should gather in a woman HoD's office.

My colleagues hesitated and bypassed me when there was any requirement for my signatures as HoD. They would forward documentation without my signature as HoD of Education and the officials up the hierarchy were fine with that. On one occasion, all faculty had to submit research proposals for an internal grant. The requirement was that each faculty member should write a proposal and procure the HoD's signature and the department's official stamp. My colleagues were not comfortable with getting my signatures as the HoD and so one of them submitted the proposal directly to the research office without the HoD's signature. Another sent his grant proposal to a member of the department to get my signature and stamp. I examined the proposal and noted that it was incomplete and needed more information. I took the application and official stamp to my colleague. I worked with him on the application in his office to make him feel comfortable with me as one of their colleagues, and to remove his hesitation about

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my being his HoD. But despite my collaborative efforts with colleagues, they remained distant from me. Their continual treatment of me as an outsider because I was a woman made me feel even more pressure.

While working in the university, as a faculty member and a HoD, I was also not taken seriously by other employees. For example, the janitor would not clean my office. Each day upon entering the office, the table and furniture were covered with dust, with no clean spot in the office to place my purse or other belongings. My daily ritual became looking for the janitor and requesting he clean my office. He always tried to delay cleaning my office as much as possible and offered different excuses for this behavior. Usually, I dusted the office myself and even cleaned the washroom. On one occasion, I became greatly upset with my dirty office and asked him why he wouldn't clean my office in the morning. The janitor's answer was that he had to clean all the other clerks' offices first, so he didn't have time to clean mine. So, he couldn't be late cleaning the clerks' offices because they were male, but he could risk not cleaning a female director's office.

Funny, once I gave directions to the janitor about cleaning and learned he had told other staff that he never did any cleaning work for his wife at home, so how could he do that for "madam's" (referring to me). It was insulting for him to clean for a woman and his mind was unable to process the difference between his wife at home and a woman at the workplace; he considered both of us women and thus inferior. It reinforced my feeling that men in this culture only know one status for women: "inferior or subordinate to male." I had problems with getting tasks done by my clerk as well. The problems I encountered getting my clerk to work constitutes another example of men's attitudes toward women. Clerks are administrative assistants who are supposed to do office work. Whenever I would ask him to do something, he would disappear. This wouldn't have occurred in the case of a male HoD's instructions to a clerk.

Most of the faculty throughout the university belittled my work giving me further feelings of insufficiency. For example, an assistant professor and administrative director from the department of computer science commented to me, "I have higher qualifications and have published research. I really deserve what I have got, but madam, you have been favored." To put it another way, he asserted that he earned a similar administrative position based on abilities and merit, whereas I had received the same positions based on favoritism from higher authorities. In another incident, a colleague commented "Oh madam, we have to work a lot with all the teaching and management responsibilities. You can't understand the hardships," and another time, sarcastically asserted, "Oh madam, you are having a good time and enjoying everything. You don't know what hardships we face with all our work." Readers should note I had an equal teaching load and more management and leadership responsibilities compared to all other faculty members. The assistant professor was telling me he had higher qualifications, while disregarding my qualifications and professional experience. I earned a degree from an American university, a highly prestigious achievement in my country, and yet my colleague still devalued my accomplishments. He made that claim because I was a woman and he almost certainly would never make that assertion to a male colleague.

The collective effect of these comments formerly forced me to work harder—believing I needed to do more than everyone else to prove that I deserved what I received. Despite colleagues' mean and discouraging behavior, I succeeded in organizing several big events that constituted landmark achievements in the institution. For example, I successfully conducted the first women's leadership seminar and several other programs as well. I established an office to support women at the institution. Through this new institutional office, I started a system of democratic elections for female undergraduate and graduate students which contributed to the

leadership capabilities and civic and democratic development of university female students.

I also focused on students' overall development through conducting extracurricular activities. My intentions were to create a vibrant, healthy, and creative environment for university students. I organized student Education Week; the program included essay writing competitions, painting competitions, and declamation contests, along with funfair events. I successfully organized book fair events, which constituted another university milestone at the university. I organized and conducted these first ever events since the inception of that institution in 2014. None of my male colleagues have ever conducted such extracurricular events there to date.

Unfortunately, those landmark accomplishments highlighted me as a threat to some of the local community conservatives. A negative propaganda campaign started against me, and I faced major hardships. But the important point is that I still felt insufficient and my confidence was low, because of the constant feed of comments and behavior of the people around me, as I have previously mentioned.

Women's work needs to be valued and appreciated. I realized later through my experiences that a women's work has been devalued from the beginning in my country. In traditional gender roles, women are given lesser-regarded responsibilities over the household while men work jobs outside the home. As more women have entered the workplace, men still consider women as lower status even when working together in similar professional fields.

In my culture, men go berserk when they have a female leader. It happened several times that when my boss appointed me as a committee chair, all the other members would totally ignore me and not work with me on the task. For example, I had to lead a group of

faculty members to work on drafting the undergraduate and graduate student semester rules. As the committee chair, I called a meeting to work on the task. Surprisingly, none of the team members responded and no one showed up for the meeting. After a few days, I learned that the group met without me, worked on the document themselves, and sent the draft to the vice chancellor for review. When I asked the male committee about their action, a member told me that since the vice chancellor had the document, I could get it from him. I was totally shocked and felt disgraced.

I had two questions: Why did the group ignore my role as committee chair; and how could the vice chancellor accept the document from the group members without communicating with me as the committee chair?; a complete violation of protocol. My male university team simply could not accept a woman's leadership.

The vice chancellor realized that the team members' egos were hurt at the prospects of working under a woman. Rather than follow what would be considered in other cultures normal protocol, the vice chancellor kept silent and accepted the draft. In this case and similar situations, the vice chancellor would attempt to pacify me with statements like, "It's okay, you are the leader of the committee in formal documents anyways." He once admitted to me with a smile, "these guys (my colleagues) have problems with accepting female leadership."

My vice chancellor openly expressed that women should be supported and respected in the workplace. Generally, he would do so himself and advise my colleagues to do the same. But later, I realized that he also used me as a façade to show the world that women were included and respected in his organization. He also ignored my opinions and disregarded me when there were opportunities for important management or policy experiences. For example, I would be invited to be a part of the team when officials visited our institution, but I would remain silent for hours during those meetings. I was never invited during conversations to

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express my views nor included in any serious talk. If I expressed my opinion, the vice chancellor would dismiss that with a smile and kind remark. My judgment didn't matter and was never solicited.

Similarly, I was never given a chance to participate in any policy decisions, whereas my male colleagues were given those opportunities, even though I had the same qualifications and even more professional experience than them. For example, the Higher Education Commission is Pakistan's highest body responsible for universities' policies, and I was never invited to participate in its meetings.

I was a member of my university's statutory body charged with enforcing rules and regulations in the institution, but I faced the same problems in these meetings as well. I was a show piece, never felt involved, and wasn't taken seriously. Upon joining the meeting, I would get only a few nice remarks about my beauty and dress, but my thoughts on discussion topics were never requested. The university vice chancellor presided over those meetings, and would invite opinions from every member except me. As was the case with other meetings described earlier, I was silent for hours and most probably the vice chancellor could not detach himself from prevailing cultural and social notions of male dominance out of fear of losing the respect of his fellow men.

I felt helpless and began to believe I lacked leadership skills because none of my male colleagues took my vision for the university seriously. Despite excellent educational credentials, more professional experience than my colleagues, and an ardent desire to educate students in a somewhat backward area for globalization, and to inspire female students to work hard for success, the culture of male domination constantly kept me from finding value in my work.

Because of the recent US evacuation from Afghanistan, Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) became active in the area in the latter half of 2022. TTP is allied with the Afghan Taliban and had fought along with them against the US in Afghanistan. Most TTP members are young men from nearby areas and are Islamic extremists. Although they don't represent Pakistani society at large, their relationship with the general public is complex. For example, when any TTP member was killed in Afghanistan, their funerals served to exploit religious emotions, and hundreds of thousands of people would attend the services. Instead of offering condolences, people would congratulate the parents for the martyrdom of their young sons. The parents, though sad for their loss, felt proud and satisfied that their sons were confirmed to be in the highest level of paradise. Nonetheless, many people admire the TTP jihadists, but opt out of joining the group or fighting, since they believe in jihad and paradise for others, but education and careers for themselves.

In the local area, the TTP group has a three-point agenda: (1) full control without any interruption from the Pakistani government or the army, (2) Shariah Law in the area, and (3) education reform, with a ban on women's education as the basis, just like in Afghanistan.

I learned about a few attacks, and the security situation was deteriorating. Meanwhile, I left for another city to attend a workshop and learned how the TTP distributed pamphlets back in my home city informing people that Shariah Law would be implemented in the area. Women were asked to not step out of their houses and to stop going to schools and colleges as Western education was corrupting the society. Warning letters were sent to women teachers to stop their work, or they and their families would face dire consequences. One day, while I was still attending the workshop, my university vice chancellor sent messages asking me to stay in the city and not come back because my life was in danger. I guess he received reports from various intelligence agencies. I phoned my children and asked them to stay home

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and not go out. My husband was living in another city, so I asked him to go to the children and keep them inside, while I was trying to figure out what to do. My colleagues were posting news in the faculty WhatsApp group about the killings and threats. I learned that a police station was attacked just 300–500 meters (328–547 yards) from the university campus and our university security guards were attacked twice, and their weapons taken away.

After a week, when my workshop ended, I travelled back home. The next morning, when I went to the administration building, the environment was totally different from two weeks ago. The building was quiet, and only one or two staff members could be seen. I went to my office and spent the day there. Sensing the environment, I was scared because most of the employees were absent, and everybody was silent about the situation. I returned to the office the next day and heard that two male faculty members who were walking through campus to teach classes had seen TTP groups patrolling the

university. They chose not to risk their lives, and returned to their hostels. The same day, our university security director entered my office and asked me to leave as I was a possible target. He also told me that our vice chancellor and the registrar had also gone underground due to death threats. It was a very new, strange, and hard situation for me, but I was not alone. There were my three children, my personal belongings, etc., and I was nervous about what to do. The same day, a friend of mine messaged me indicating an army officer discovered me on the radar of TTP and that I should leave my home immediately. Now, I had no other choice, and I left the place the same day.

I lived with a relative for some time elsewhere, and then moved to the capital for about two months. Later, my children and I left for Thailand. ♦

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