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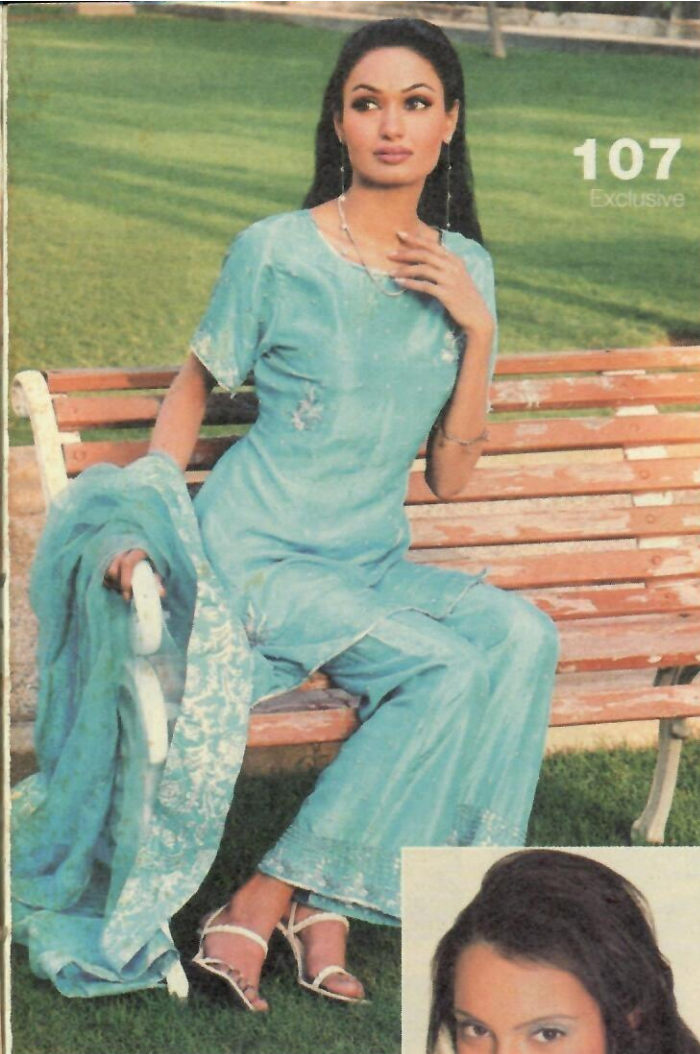
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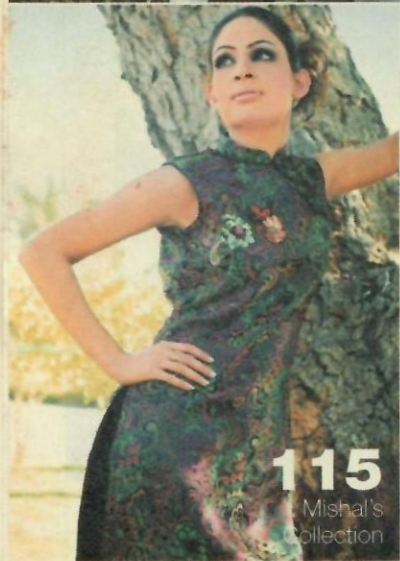
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Women's Rights

Are you serious Mr. President?

Zubeida Mustafa, our guest writer this month, questions President Musharraf's real intentions behind his brave promises of women's empowerment.

President Pervez Musharraf will probably go down in Pakistan's history as the head of state who has been most vocal on women's rights and female empowerment. But he has also set another record of sorts. The gap between his words and actions - what they term as the *qaul* and *fail* in Urdu - of a leader has never been wider in the context of women's development. If the president's statements in support of women's rights were to be put together, one could produce a hefty tome. But set against the backdrop of the sharply rising graph of violence against women in the years that Musharraf has been in office, the president's claims have a hollow ring and lose their credibility.

Take the speech he made at the International Women's Day function organized by the Ministry of Women's Development in Islamabad last month. He said all the right things about violence against women. He condemned (dis)honour killings and *Wani* as "intolerable" (though I personally wish he had found a stronger adjective). He added that no "civilized" society could "allow" such practices. That is why his government was taking every possible measure to curb these social evils. What step has he taken?

He set up an autonomous National Commission on the Status of Women and gave it sufficient powers to identify the evils which are undermining the status of women. He reserved a third of the seats in the local bodies for women and thus facilitated the election of 40,000 women in the local government as councillors and even *nazims* in some cases. He re-introduced and increased the reserved seats in the National Assembly, the provincial assemblies and the Senate. Today there are 229 women parliamentarians in Pakistan - and this is the highest number the country has ever had.

But is this enough? The president also tells us that he has declared honour killing to be murder. But wasn't that murder in any case without being so declared?

If Musharraf has in all earnest acted to improve the status of women in Pakistan and make our society safer for women, then why are the results not showing? The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's recently released report, *The State of Human Rights in 2003*, records some horrendous figures in respect of violence against women.

It notes, "There was evidence during the year that more women were reporting domestic violence of various kinds, including rape, molestation and other crimes, there was no indication that the rates of such crimes was on the decline. Indeed the continued expansion of the *jirga* system, under which tribal gatherings delivered verdicts, once more led to crimes being committed against women."

The Human Rights Watch estimated that a woman in Pakistan was raped every two hours while up to 90 per cent of the women suffered from some form of domestic violence. According to the Karachi-based Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid, in 2000-2003, 973 women were raped, 1,065 were gang-raped,

2,866 murdered, 1,511 became victims of *karo kari*, 3,273 injured, 530 burnt to death, and 4,478 were kidnapped.

If the situation continues to be as bad as before for women, the simple reason is that the president may have done much to create the infrastructure for the empowerment of women. But he hasn't done enough to change the social environment and the legal framework which encourage violence against women. In his Women's Day speech the president said that women have been empowered through the seats that have been reserved for them in the assemblies and it is up to them

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to use their new found role for the uplift of their compatriots.

Inarguably, that is very sound advice. But as we generally know, and as the president would also be knowing, what this empowerment can achieve has serious limitations. Without the government's total commitment to the uplift of women and to a policy of providing them a level playing field at par with their male counterparts, the women councillors and legislators can do very little to improve the situation.

Take only the case of violence against women which is a major and depressing manifestation of the malaise in the society's approach to the gender issue. With women regarded as lesser beings, it is inevitable that they do not receive equal rights in every walk of life – be it in family matters, marriage, employment, economic security, education, health care, physical safety and human dignity. Although all these issues need to be addressed, violence calls for immediate attention since it can be a matter of life and death.

To tackle violence against women, it is not enough to empower women politically and leave it to them to eliminate the problem. By the time the women legislators and councillors can create an impact socially and politically, many decades would have passed and innumerable lives would have been lost in the interregnum.

Hence it is the government's responsibility to play a meaningful and proactive role in the matter. It must first of all create a system to provide physical safety to

women. This calls for a tightening of the police discipline and reorienting its working, especially vis-à-vis women, to ensure that crimes against women are checked effectively. Violence can only be stopped by countering it with coercion which the state alone is empowered to do.

There is also the need to revamp the laws so that many of the excesses committed against women are treated as a violation of the law. At present many cases of domestic violence are perceived as being beyond the pale of law and something to be addressed at the social level. Then there are laws which actually promote violence against women. How else would one describe the Hudood Ordinances? It is a fact that they provide an opening to men to victimize women out of vindictiveness or spite. How these laws are exploited is proved by the fact that nearly 90 per cent of the women imprisoned under the Hudood laws are acquitted as enough evidence is not found against them.

If President Musharraf is sincere about improving the status of women, he should repeal the Hudood Ordinances as recommended by the National Commission on the Status of Women. To wait for the National Assembly to take this momentous decision will be like waiting for Godot. With so many MNAs and Senators owing allegiance to the religious parties, the required number of votes can never hope to be mustered. Hence the devise of promulgating an ordinance must be resorted to just as was done to usher in these laws in the first place. ♦

Issues (Continued from pg. 21)

constant references to men performing active and/or heroic roles and women engaged in passive, often frippery activities”.

This mindset is obvious in the Federal Curriculum Wing's recent refusal to incorporate the late journalist Najma Babar's article 'Madam Chairman, Sir', in a proposed Class Ten English textbook submitted by the Sindh Textbook Board. The article is about the young Najma going to work, while her husband got the children ready for school and looked after them, since she had a job and he didn't. The reason given for censoring this article from the proposed textbook, was that it goes against the values of Pakistani society!

Obviously, the Curriculum Wing officials don't believe in moving with the times, or allowing texts to include views that do not reflect the dominant ideologies and traditions. But how else are our children to learn that there are other ways of thinking and seeing?

The English course has not changed in over forty years. Many children struggle with English as a second language, which they know is still the language of power in this country. Accordingly, the senior English language teaching (ELT) experts, who were commissioned by Sindh Education Minister Prof. Anita Ghulam Ali to formulate new English language

textbooks for Classes 8-12, tried to include material in these new textbooks that would make English learning more interesting, accessible and student-friendly.

However, the Federal Curriculum Wing rejected much of the new material and provided a list of topics that the new English textbooks should include - like drug abuse, traffic rules, festivals of Pakistan and so on. Topics that are hardly likely to excite the imagination of most students...

But it is the material that was removed from these proposed English textbooks that is of particular concern. Besides Najma Babar's article, a poem by Khalil Gibran was also censored, apparently on the grounds that he is Jewish. Even if he was, should the religion of a great poet and philosopher be reason enough to remove his work?

Similarly, an essay by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's daughter Dina Wadia about her father was removed. The reason given was that he had disowned her, and in any case she is not a Muslim. Are these reasons valid? Dina Wadia was recently given the status of a State Guest when she visited Pakistan for the first time since her father's death. She has stayed away all these years because, as she has said, she didn't want to be appropriated by anybody for political purposes. One wonders how she would feel about being censored for political purposes. ♦