

# The Relevance of UN Program for Women Empowerment in an Eastern Muslim Society

Saima Esma Shahid

Doctoral Researcher at Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab  
Postal Address: 469-B, DHA, EME sector, Canal Bank, Multan Road, Lahore, Pakistan, PC 53710

## Abstract

Today, more than two decades down the road, the key areas of UN program for women empowerment are needed to be evaluated in the light of indigenous realities of eastern societies. This study examined the salient features of the said program vis a vis the general condition of status of women in an eastern and Muslim society like Pakistan, especially in its local socio-economic context. This paper argues that there is a fundamental difference in the theoretical and ideological framework between the UN program and the facts in eastern societies for identification of the problems and suggested solutions related to the status of women. It looked into whether the program is able to deliver goods in eastern societies the way it has in the western societies or not. The objective of the study was to analyze the program with respect to its relevance with general belief system and practices in Eastern societies. Secondly it demassified the monolithic notion of global issues regarding the status of women to see which parts are relevant in the local context in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, feminism, UN agenda, women rights, status of women

## 1. Introduction

Eastern societies share a unique cultural and normative makeup which is fundamentally different from the Western societies. However with a slow and gradual pace of development that entails urbanization and modernization, these societies are also encountering the challenges faced by the developed world. The phenomena of globalization has enhanced the pace and extent of these challenges for eastern and especially Muslim societies, particularly with regards to the status of women.

The UN's Commission on Status of Women (CSW) had launched a comprehensive program for women empowerment in 1995 which is called Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPA). Under this program, participating countries also reaffirmed their commitment to CEDAW (1981) and other declarations of the sort by UN. The program adopted as a resolution at the fourth general congress has 12 critical areas against which the progress is monitored every five years. Many Muslim countries including Pakistan are signatories and have ratified the program.

Eastern societies have altogether different normative structures as compared to the western societies. These differences are particularly prominent in the case of dominant understanding on the role and status of women in both societies. Also the socio-economic and political realities of the two societies are very distinct from each other. Western societies are developed with a strong democratic system in place, while most of the eastern and Muslim societies are either under autocracy and military rule or have weak democracies, with common characteristics of being underdeveloped and suffering from issues of bad governance. These multiple realities suggest that the success of a global program for women empowerment is attached with its consideration for women issues in the respective local contexts and addressing those issues in the light of indigenous realities.

The objective of this study was to identify the underlying ideological framework of the UN program for women empowerment and see its relevance with general belief system and practices in Muslim societies, particularly with reference to Pakistan. The research questions are:

- 1- What do the objectives of the UN program of CSW manifest about the ideological inclination of the program, keeping in view the socio-cultural practices and belief system in Pakistan?
- 2- In the light of the proceedings of 59<sup>th</sup> session, what is the political inclination of the said program?
- 3- What are the ways that the women in Pakistan can benefit from this global program of action?

## 2. Literature Review

The UN program for women under UN Commission for Status of Women (CSW) has been a focus of many studies, mostly in the West, discussing both the drafts of and the progress on these documents. Women's Human Rights (Bunch & Fried, 1996; Plattner, 1995), Women and Armed Conflicts (Gardam & Jarvis, 2000), Women's reproductive rights (Haslegrave & Havard, 1995), Sexuality and Women (Otto, 1995; Raymond, 1998) are among the key areas of the program. The responses and reservations shown on the agenda (Buss, 1998; Moghadam, 1996) have many commonalities with the reservations present in the Muslim societies (Bunch, 2001; Farmer, 2000).

The situation of women rights in Pakistan has been studied in local and international researches, many of which acknowledge that "religious and Qur'anic principles are frequently avoided and twisted in treatment to

women” (Bhattacharya, 2014). However the yardstick used to evaluate the status of women is mostly international standards. Studies (Shami, 2003) show a women’s rights discourse influenced by western feminism. Although the wellbeing of women in Pakistan requires an extensive work plan in more or less all of the 12 critical areas highlighted by the Beijing Declaration, we need to look at the women issues with the perspective of our indigenous requirements. While talking about feminism in Africa, Amina Mama (cited by Walters, 2005) argues that feminism must acknowledge differences of race, gender and culture. Likewise, according to reports, the reason behind women’s low employment rate and minimum labor force activity in Pakistan is the multiple roles that women have to play in our society, and which are largely determined by social, religious and cultural factors (Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013). The cultural and religious factors highlight women’s role based on the biological factor; women are the family makers in Pakistani society and not an integral part of the economic activity on the cost of their biological obligation of giving birth and raising children. Most of the studies on the variable of women’s participation in economic activity do not consider the family system in Pakistan that holds men responsible to earn and provide for his family. Western feminism has been criticized by the third world women for being hijacked by the European and American women who are only interested in contraception and abortion (Walters, 2005).

A study of the problems at home and search for indigenous solutions can lead towards some solid outcome. Changes are to be brought from within if they are to be sustained (Bano, 2009, p. 34). In the light of above mentioned studies, this article is an effort to focus on the missing aspects along with highlighting the areas already under discussion on the topic.

### 3. Methodology

For this study, the objectives of UN program for women i-e the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been analyzed through official documents. The wording, terminology and discourse of the documents are seen in the perspective of local norms and belief system. The archives of the debates and views published and presented on different media were studied for a general perception of this program in public which have a bearing in answering the research questions. The ethnographic readings and observations of the 59<sup>th</sup> session of CSW which was named as Beijing +20 (held from 8 to 20 March, 2015) are used to analyze the purpose and outcome of the said UN program.

### 4. Findings and discussion

#### 4.1 Ideological and theoretical framework of the draft

The drafts of the convention (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action include such articles and clauses which are not consistent with the collectively held belief systems of eastern societies and developing world. Moreover, the interpretations of the terms used in different clauses are openly in conflict with the accepted cultural norms and beliefs in the majority of Muslim world.

The articles and clauses of the said program show an underlying ideology of feminism as a basic framework of thought. The representative of Vatican, a professor at Harvard, Mary Ann Glendon pronounced it as an effort to revive the dead feminism of the 1970s, which had been dismissed for its negativity for men, marriage and motherhood, and its hard stance on abortion (Tempest, 1995). Also, Vatican has dismissed any chance to accept the legal recognition to abortion, and so have many Muslim countries.

In the light of dominant and popular feminist stances, few articles of the Convention and clauses of the program are discussed as under:

- The critical area “women and media” (clause 33 of BDPFA) admits that “global communication networks have been used to spread stereotyped and demeaning images of women for narrow commercial and consumerist purposes”<sup>3</sup>. However it does not demand to regulate media content for discouragement of the commercial use of women’s beauty and sexuality and the objectification of women on media which is a worldwide problem faced by women today.
- The article 6 of the Convention demands States Parties to “take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women”. However it does not ask for any measures taken to safeguard women from having to turn into prostitutes, in order to end this exploitation. Instead prostitutes are termed as “sex workers” which shows an effort to approve this practice as a normal and acceptable profession just like other professions. The efforts of many Western NGOs culminated at Beijing in 1995 to exempt prostitution from the category of human rights violations and portraying it as a human right instead (Raymond, 1998). A number of distinctions (i-e consent, age etc were made to regard this form of violence against women as a human right.

There are a number of socio-cultural factors and social pressures in both the Eastern and Western societies which lead women into this profession. Also there are certain taboos and mindsets among

members of our society which prevent such women from abandonment of their notorious profession and starting a noble life anew. Prostitutes are stigmatized in West too but the organizations for their rights like COYOTE in the US “works more for the rights of the customers and the industry, rather than for the rights of women to leave prostitution” (Raymond, 1998). In both of these situations women need to be helped through legal manifestations. Prostitution is a way of easy money for poor, but according to the generally held belief in Muslims, against the dignity of a human being. Prevention from this undignified practice is not possible without legislative support just the way doors to child labor have been blocked through laws so that poverty may not lead people into this undignified source of easy money.

- An exaggerated emphasis on the economic independence of women as an equal right and increase in the number of women in paid-labor force entails weakening of the institution of family. Feminists have failed to recognize the burden of double duties on women. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the director policy planning at the US State Department came in the cross-hairs of feminist circles when she resigned from her dream job in 2012. She did so upon realizing that she was not being able to give due attention to her teen age boys along with pursuing her career<sup>4</sup>. While the Beijing declaration maintains “Equality is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice”<sup>5</sup>, the claim demands for the realization where the rights start turning into duties, thus further increasing the liabilities, and where a woman needs equity instead of equality with man in order to gain true happiness. Although the biological determinist notion that all the roles and relations of the two sexes are fixed in a single, static pattern is not compatible with the demands of a modern society where Human Development Index is measured through income per capita of the population, however, women’s economic participation enhanced through the false needs created by the social pressures of consumer culture and commercialism are again a form of exploitation that cannot be justified in the name of women’s economic empowerment. Women’s forced employment is a severe breach of fundamental human rights that suggests a legal intervention to prevent this (Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013, p. 213).

The interpretations of the terms used in the draft are criticized by the right in those countries which include Church, pro-family and pro-life groups and NGOs. Family has been interpreted as “collection of individuals”, Mother as “care giver” and the word “partners” has been used instead of couple. The interpretation of the term “gender” was also severely contested from the right wing groups (Baden & Goetz, 1997). The “dubious interpretations” of the term “gender”, “based on world-views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes” has been dismissed by Vatican<sup>6</sup>.

The stance of Church on the possible interpretations of the terms further alludes to the influence of homosexual perspective on the program.

#### 4.2 Political inclination (Observations from 59<sup>th</sup> session of CSW)

##### 4.2.1 Saliency of Malala Issue

The 59<sup>th</sup> session of the CSW was a continuation of the evaluation of progress towards the MDGs with respect to the twelve critical areas of the said program. The researcher had a chance to attend this session that held from 8<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> March 2015. There was a visible resonance of Malala’s “heroic” story from Pakistan in events and sessions, who was recently awarded Nobel Peace Prize from the UN. Being a young woman highlighted as a savior of the cause of girls education on the face of religious extremism, she was widely hailed and celebrated during assorted events of the Session.

On the other hand, Malala continues to receive a tepid response at home. Majority Pakistanis are not only hesitant to acknowledge her as a hero, but also consider her as a tool to pursue Western agendas in the region (Yusuf, 2013). In order to raise awareness on education, the UN declared 12 July as Malala day which was not acknowledged by Pakistani government.

Prominence and promotion of Malala as a champ of women and girls’ rights which is not congruent with the perception at home and consistent with the West’s political agenda instead, alludes to the ideological nature and political inclination of the program in favor of the US and its allies.

##### 4.2.2 Ignoring the plight of Kashmiri women

The twelve critical areas of the Beijing program include Women and Armed Conflicts under which it has been acknowledged that “wars and armed conflicts destroy families and societies and leave women and girls particularly vulnerable. Sexual violence is widespread and often used as a war tactic”. The program tends to “train peacekeepers to detect, address and stop conflict-related sexual violence, while also supporting the reform of justice and security institutions”. However, the Session ignored the plight of Kashmiri women, who are suffering from sexual violence for years and turned widows in large numbers due to a never ending state of war in the valley. Although under UN resolutions, the Kashmiri people are given a right of self determination, India’s interests in the region are well backed by the West in its global and regional policies. A complete black out of the mention of Kashmiri women’s situation alludes to the inclination of the said program towards the political

agenda of the West.

#### 4.2.3 Resolution for Palestinian women

The 59<sup>th</sup> session adopted a resolution on “situation of and assistance to Palestinian women” that was approved with a record majority vote. The resolution held Israel responsible for the plight of Palestinian women. Keeping in view the pro-Israel political policies of the West and the US-government’s pronounced commitment to the state of Israel (which was manifested on the forum in the form of abstention of the European Union and a negative vote from the US), such a resolution being put up on the Session’s agenda shows a genuine adherence of the program to the cause of women’s welfare. However the rationale for voting against the resolution given by the US and Israel is the same given by the EU and Japan to justify their abstention, showing a unanimity of thoughts towards the issue among the global players. (Table 1)

Table 1 <i>Reasons for not favoring the resolution expressed by the dissenting countries</i>		
<u>Country</u>	<u>Reason 1</u> (Political nature of the issue)	<u>Reason 2</u> (Partisan draft against Israel)
Israel	Issue has been politicized	Text not balanced and accurate
European Union	Country-specific elements	-
United States	Political elements	-
Japan	-	Imbalanced draft

#### 4.3 Towards benefitting from the program

##### 4.3.1 Revisiting the gendered approach for women rights

The common issues of majority population emanating from one fundamental issue of bad governance do not necessarily need a gendered approach to be resolved in countries like Pakistan. This can be termed as the local version of the notion “Women rights as Human Rights” which is a popular idea in women rights struggle in the world today and included in the *Vienna Declaration and Program of Action* (1995) as well as a part of CEDAW. It is specifically relevant to the situation of countries like Pakistan where corruption is rampant among successive governments, and public funds are hardly used for public good. In addition, the inability of governments to devise effective programs for poverty alleviation, education and health, and to top it off, the absence of accountability are the root causes of its population’s endless afflictions. Had the gendered approach have a positive effect on this situation, the female legislators and ministers most of whom come from the most backward and rural areas of the country, must have created a difference by now. According to Saira Bano (2009):

“Although women’s representation in the assemblies has increased quotas, they do not work in isolation: they cannot be separated from dominant societal attitudes and norms. The socioeconomic position of women in society means they are treated unequally by the men in the assemblies and their views are not taken seriously” (p. 31)

Same is the case with lady councilors as Jabeen (2004) writes, quoted by Bano (2009) “The general knowledge of councilors about their job is to serve the Nazim at the district level” (p.32).

Thus in the current circumstances where a lack of political will is at the heart of all problems, an increased presence of female legislators is hard to show any positive results. Same is the situation with other fields of women’s public engagement. The laws for equal opportunities for women are well in place. Articles 25 and 26 of the constitution of Pakistan specifically ban gender discrimination. These and other provisions for working women in the constitution are implemented by various statutes, ordinances, labour policies, and acts of parliament. Only the practical steps according to the legal framework on behalf of the respective governments are awaited to be taken (Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013).

##### 4.3.2 Discourse of Women’s rights activists

Friedman quotes Hina Jilani that the women’s rights activists in Pakistan like her sought a secular basis for their struggle and want equality according to the standards of international human rights law and not religion, as religion causes controversies (Friedman, 1995, p. 23). Same is the case with other Muslim countries. At the Beijing +20, the event of Indonesia’s women rights activists concluded with a strong notion on behalf of the panelists that the Islamic *Shariah* laws in the country were the basic hindrance towards achieving equal rights for women, without repealing which, women could not progress on the lines of global agenda. A law that was criticized the most was about wife’s obligation to take permission from her husband to take a job outside her home, which was a great breach of a woman’s fundamental human rights in their eyes. This reminded me of my interview with Dr Sitti Maria (Islamabad, March 2012) a member parliament and an active member of the Islamic movement in Malaysia. Dr Maria is not only satisfied with the status of women given by Islam, but also a practical example of how enabling the *Shariah* is for women. According to her, marriage is a contract in Islam, and whatever you decide with mutual agreement at the time of contracting a marriage, that defines your future role.

Pakistan being a country of 98% Muslim population, the meta-narrative of religion (Islam) can be explored

to bail out women from the backward and ignorant socioeconomic structures which deny women's rights and use them as a commodity. A positive disposition for religious values is more likely to earn popularity among public for women's rights activists in Muslim societies in comparison to a self-denial outlook which makes their struggle counterproductive among their respective public. According to the survey by Gallup published in New York Times, an overwhelming majority of women in Muslim societies do not consider them as oppressed and find the spiritual and moral aspects of their culture the most valuable for them<sup>1</sup>. Being unable to acknowledge and fully exploit the strengths of our socio-cultural and economic system already in place for centuries will be a reductionist approach towards empowerment of our women.

#### 4.3.3 Making use of the available structure

Like other Muslim countries, Pakistan has a strong family system with man as head of the family and bread winner for his family members. The unemployment of a man renders a family of four to ten members suffering from poverty. In such a society a program for poverty alleviation in women can be equally effective by reducing the unemployment rate of men.

#### 4.3.4 Engaging men and boys

The clause "Engaging men and boys in empowerment of women" has been an integral part of the program since 1995. Since the cultures of Muslim and eastern societies are embedded in patriarchal practices, a program for change in the status of women cannot bear fruits without a change in the mindset of men in these societies. A social system based on strong family with man as head of the family requires a treatment different from those who have lost the centrality of family as an institution. The cultural typology of eastern and Western societies is remarkably different from each other with Eastern cultures being high context and collectivist. Collectivist culture is characterized by strong integration and an emphasis on relationships among people to a greater degree than the cultures of individualism where the integration is loose (Hofstede, 1984). This fact suggests devising an effective plan of creating awareness in such societies without having to uproot or disregard the local norms and culture.

Secondly, engaging men and boys entails a collective effort to fight against a mind set. A cross-gender struggle for improving status of women will lead towards a friendly and non-hostile environment of gender relations and a genuine quest for the right thing to do. The pursuit of knowledge on behalf of mankind is a pursuit of search for truth and common good for humanity. This characteristic of true knowledge creation deserves an unbiased quest for the solutions to the problems faced by the mankind today. Instead of man versus woman, the fundamental paradigm of right versus wrong has much wider scope in combating the issues of status of women.

Thirdly, the "women for women" approach is hard to deliver goods in the closely integrated societies where women by virtue of being tied together in multiple competitive relations tend to let down each other to maximize personal space.

## 5. Conclusion

The global program for empowerment of women by UN is a comprehensive plan of women's well being. Working under three main headings of "Equality, Peace and Progress" it has shown success towards formulating a common global agenda for women rights. However twenty two years down the road, there are many aspects which are in dire need of improvement as a result of consultations and genuine deliberations among member states with a true spirit of women's progress in all areas. The guiding principles of the Commission on Status of Women clearly state that the Commission will work for the betterment of women worldwide, irrespective of nationality, language, race and religion<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand we seldom find any decision taken on this forum which is not in line with the political and economic interests of the global players. We may find hope for Pakistani women in this program by looking at women issues in its local context and find solutions suitable to its socio-cultural imperatives.

## References

- 1- [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/middleeast/08women.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/middleeast/08women.html?_r=0)
- 2- <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article25>
- 3- <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>
- 4- <http://www.npr.org/2012/06/21/155498926/the-impossible-juggling-act-motherhood-and-work>
- 5- <http://pbenenson.blogspot.nl/2012/02/wikipedia-beijing-declaration-and.html>
- 6- <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/12hollysee.html>
- 7- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Nations\\_Commission\\_on\\_the\\_Status\\_of\\_Women](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Commission_on_the_Status_of_Women)

\*

Baden, S., & Goetz, A. M. (1997). Who needs [sex] when you can have [gender]? Conflicting discourses on gender at Beijing. *Feminist Review*, 3-25.

Bano, S. (2009). Women in parliament in Pakistan: Problems and potential solutions. *Women's Studies Journal*,

- 23(1), 19-35.
- Bhattacharya, S. (2014). STATUS OF WOMEN IN PAKISTAN. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 51(1).
- Bunch, C. (2001). Women's Rights are Human Rights. *Lola Press*(16), 52.
- Bunch, C., & Fried, S. (1996). Beijing'95: Moving women's human rights from margin to center. *Signs*, 200-204.
- Buss, D. E. (1998). Robes, Relics and Rights: The Vatican and the Beijing Conference on Women. *Social & Legal Studies*, 7(3), 339-363.
- Farmer, A. (2000). What does Beijing Plus Five equal? *Reproductive freedom news/from the Center for Reproductive Law & Policy*, 9(7), 2.
- Friedman, E. (1995). Women's human rights: The emergence of a movement. *Women's rights, human rights: International feminist perspectives*, 18-35.
- Gardam, J., & Jarvis, M. (2000). Women and Armed Conflict: The International Response to the Beijing Platform for Action. *Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev.*, 32, 1.
- Haslegrave, M., & Havard, J. (1995). Women's Right to Health and the Beijing Platform for Action: The Retreat from Cairo? *Health and Human Rights*, 461-471.
- Hofstede, G. (1984). The cultural relativity of the quality of life concept. *Academy of Management review*, 9(3), 389-398.
- Moghadam, V. M. (1996). The fourth world conference on women: dissension and consensus. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 3(1), 93-102.
- Otto, D. (1995). Lesbians-Not in My Country. *Alternative LJ*, 20, 288.
- Plattner, M. (1995). The Status of Women Under International Human Rights Law and the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, Beijing, China. *Ky. LJ*, 84, 1249-1303.
- Raymond, J. G. (1998). *Prostitution as violence against women: NGO stonewalling in Beijing and elsewhere*. Paper presented at the Women's studies international forum.
- Sarwar, F., & Abbasi, A. S. (2013). An in-depth analysis of women's labor force participation in Pakistan. *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research*, 15(2), 208-215.
- Shami, M. A. A. (2003). Political Empowerment of Women in Pakistan. *Pakistan Vision*, 10(1), 141-150.
- Tempest, R. (1995). Vatican's Voice for Women; U.S. Lawyer Brings Balanced Approach to Beijing Forum (H. Edition, Trans.). Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles Times.
- Walters, M. (2005). *Feminism: a very short introduction*: OUP Oxford.
- Yusuf, H. (2013). About Malala Backlash, Latitude, *New York Times Jul 18*.