

# International Education

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## THE ROLE OF LITERACY AND EDUCATION IN WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT: PAKISTAN

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### *Women in Development Projects in Pakistan*

To speak of women's development related to Pakistan means, realistically, to speak of change in the condition of women (Chu & Pyburn, 1988). Development, as Westerners speak about it, relates to a very positive view of people and their ability to improve life, to eat better, to gain more knowledge, and to become subjects as opposed to being objects of the social systems in which they live. Development relates to how people learn to be critically conscious, how they learn to control their environment in a way that will unleash its power for their personal growth, for participation in and sharing of the goals of society. Development relates to new knowledge, education if you will, which the person uses to mediate his/her world. Development education, therefore, is the process individuals and groups employ to become movers, changers, or—to use Paulo Friere's words—to develop a "transitive consciousness" (Friere, 1973, p. 18) or a critical awareness.

Women's development in Pakistan, an Islamic country, becomes a contradiction of terms in many way because Islam prescribes what roles women play individually and in relationship to their men. These roles, practiced by pious women, largely exclude them from the dynamics of change envisioned by educators in development projects sponsored by philanthropic foundations and donor agencies such as USAID.

Women in Pakistan, particularly the large majority of rural women, bear a number of burdens which Islam and social custom places on them as they interact in a fast changing world. Three major burdens are sex segregation (*purdah*), their legal status in Islam, and their role in the family. These are barriers to change, barriers to the ability of women to take part with their sisters in many rural development activities going on in other Third World countries.

### *Sex Segregation*

*Purdah* is a means of segregating women from the male world. Much value is placed in Pakistan on the segregation of the sexes, as well as conventions of male superiority which supports female subordination. *Purdah's* "literal translation is *curtain* and is the word used to describe the traditional system of enforcing high standards of female modesty" (Khan, Ater, & Arledge, 1984, p. 6). Modesty is enforced by having women live in separate quarters, by having strict rules about their ability to move around outside the home, by veiling or by using the *burga* which hides their faces from non-family males (kinsmen), by arranging early marriages, and by limiting their education to basic knowledge about Islam through limited study of the Koran. *Purdah* functions effectively to shield women from the outside world, to shield them from the prying eyes of other men. Covering their heads and faces signals piety and a deference to Allah through humility and respect in His presence, and this custom always take place at the time of prayer.

*Purdah* is a highly effective social reality symbolizing the condition of women in Pakistan—their limitations in a man's world socially, economically, and politically. The cloth worn over the head slips off easily, and women are constantly adjusting these cloths as they work at home making bread, carrying water, caring for children, or producing crafts for sale. This constant adjustment of the scarf symbolizes the adjustment women make to the world, their world in Islam, and beyond Islam. Developers, those who bring education and therefore change, are in essence asking women to make new adjustments to *purdah*. "Muslim women have a double burden because their religion prohibits participation in programs for change, in development projects, unless these are designed to work within cultural norms" (Chu & Pyburn, 1988, p. 2). As women face the demands of change which accompany education and literacy, and of modernity as opposed to retaining their traditional religious norms through which they interpret reality, then these women become immigrants (Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 39) in a new world. Few are prepared for this sojourn; yet they must be able to find psychological, sociological, and even cosmological support in their traditional roots while they venture tentatively into the new worlds around them. *Women must not be asked to adjust their veils too much.*

The degree to which *purdah* is observed varies widely depending on the family's income, where they live, their level of education, their occupations, and their degree of religious affiliation (Papanek, 1971, p. 517). Papanek has pointed out that observance of *purdah* increases at higher social and economic levels. Nonetheless, *purdah* is practiced by

all to some degree except for beggars, street and house sweepers, and prostitutes.

#### *Legal Status of Woman*

Islamic women of Pakistan have a different legal status than men. Sex in Islam is the means of differentiating between human beings (Ahmad, 1982), particularly in regard to education, property ownership, inheritance, the placement of children (with the father in the case of divorce), the *giving* of divorce by males to women, the distribution of property and, importantly, how women function to serve their men and how men protect their own honor through segregating their women from society. The differentiated legal status of women is striking when one studies the custom in Islam of allowing males to have up to four legal wives. Women, on the other hand, find their identity in their husband, not husbands. Legally, a Christian foreign woman can marry a Muslim Pakistani and take on his religion, his identity, his family. Conversely, a non-Muslim man from the Western world seeking to marry a Muslim woman from Pakistan faces legal barriers which are insurmountable unless he takes on her religion and becomes a Muslim formally (and even then, social custom seldom allows women to leave and marry men of other classes or countries).

Legally, women live under a religious system controlled by men, have access to Islamic courts judged by men, have ability to seek for their rights in legal codes written by men, and live in families dominated by men.

In 1956, a commission was set up in Pakistan to study the entire area of women's roles in the Muslim family (Baqui, 1976). Out of the commission emerged the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, and the dissolution of the Muslim Marriage Act. "These laws were basically designed to protect girls from early marriages, to afford more rights for the annulment of marriages, and to restrict polygamy to certain specific conditions, including consent of the wife" (Khan, Ater, & Arledge, 1984).

The Pakistan Constitution Act of 1973 called for equality of all citizens and prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex. Realistically, women have been unable to participate in these civil rights through lack of a voice, lack of opportunity, and because *pardah* has maintained the veil between them and the males who are in authority and power.

Those involved in development education projects must, therefore, meet women where they can be met by other women. Such meetings occur in segregated schools, in village agriculture extension projects, in women's health and child care centers, and, for a few, in birth control

clinics run by women. Those involved in development education have but limited means of reaching women effectively to provide assistance.

In a very real sense, technical assistance to rural women in Pakistan has just begun. "There are no sector-wide development programs for women designed to provide significant opportunities for their participation or to upgrade this large 'womanpower' resource toward more productive work outside traditional roles in their homes" (Chu & Bergsma, 1986, p. 22).

#### *Women in Family Life*

Females are subordinate in the family; males are superior. "As women fulfill the roles of daughter, sister, wife, and mother, their attitudes must change to suit each role. In all social classes a male kinsman is always economically, legally, and morally responsible for the women, regardless of her [*sic*] marital status. It is easier to understand, then, why a woman's behavior becomes a measure of the status of her protectors" (Khan, Ater, & Arledge, 1984, p. 7).

Within the family the ideal woman is shy, quiet, chaste, hard working, subservient to males, modest, frugal, and dependent. Pastner (1975, p. 248) describes what many Western women have observed who have had access to the *zennana*, or women's quarter. Pastner depicts the scene of *women with women* as being very different from women with men, a scene in which women can speak crudely, exhibit overt sexual actions in dance and play, and are talkative, immodest, ribald, and risque. Islamic women writers in other countries relate how women communicate with women, female friends and relatives, about very intimate topics including polygamous marriage problems, widowhood, the indignity of physical and sexual violence they experience, and stigma and shame of being barren, and the double standard of sexual morality and jealousy of them for their men who have other lovers and a freer sexual life. (Three authors provide excellent insight into Islamic women's problems in *Khul-Khall: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories* by Nayra Atiya, Syracuse University Press, 1982; *Distant View of a Minaret* by Ahfa Ruffaat, Quartet Books, London, 1983; and *Women at Point Zero* by Nawal el Saadani, Zed Books, London, 1983.) Pastner attributes this behavior of women as being a psychological or social reaction/accommodation to their lack of legitimate access to privileges and rights, a relief from male control, and a passive-aggressive means of exerting control over men through quiet, albeit unhappy, subservience, pouting, putting men in what the Western world would call the proverbial "dog house."

Women under Islam do not control their fecundity. Many women during their childbearing years, extending some 20 years, bear a child each

year or two. This role of woman as mother, defined by Islamic law, makes her a captive of the love she shares with her husband. She is burdened and made subsidiary in her every role through childbearing and homemaking related to caring for the children. She is isolated from her kin by her marriage and must find her identity in her husband's home, his children, his property, his work, his name, and his religion.

Development educators face a delicate task to bring education to women in their homes. Child and family health care specialists must bring education which fits the roles women play. Women's literacy programs, by the very act of creating a change in women's ability to read about the outside world, are involved in a developmental evolution, but care must be taken to ensure that this evolution is within cultural and religious norms of Islam.

#### *Literacy Education for Women*

Depending upon what statistics one reads, it is commonly held that the literacy rate for Pakistani rural women is one of the lowest in the world. Literacy rates vary widely for women between the provinces, particularly for rural women. Baluchistan has the lowest literacy rate for women, perhaps in the world, at .8%; the Sind, 3.4%; and the Punjab, 7.4% (Khan, 1982). These rates, when compared to an overall literacy rate of 22%, reveal a striking problem in Pakistan—that of isolation of women from information and knowledge about their own country and the world. The Women's Division of the government of Pakistan in 1982 published "Papers from the National Conference on Non-Governmental Women's Organizations," Islamabad, which reviewed the striking lack of progress in women's literacy during the 35 years after independence. In spite of the establishment of a literacy commission in early 1982, national newspapers continue to decry the lack of progress in bringing education and literacy to women (Quadri, 1982). In the fall of 1988, the Ministry of Education in Islamabad planned to establish a nation-wide Primary Education Program funded by the World Bank and USAID. This program will attempt to alleviate problems of illiteracy by bringing better trained teachers to rural areas and establishing more centers for girls' literacy, including the use of local mosques for training sites. The program calls for the training of many more female teachers. Literacy and primary education programs represent for development educators the most hopeful way to help women develop their capabilities. Changes which occur when people learn to read are hard to measure; however, literacy has been tied globally to economic development, to higher political

participation, and to human emancipation, or to echo Friere again, to the development of a "transitive consciousness."

Women in Pakistan play an important part in supporting the agricultural economy although little credit is given them for their work in planting, harvesting, animal care, cottage industries, and support of their men working in various agricultural endeavors. There is hope that through new agricultural extension programs and education programs, women can be reached at the village level to increase their capacity for productive work and for literacy. These development programs are aimed at helping women reduce their double burden and increasing their ability to access information about their country and the world around them (Metcalf, 1983). Illiterate women now play a vital role in Pakistan in supporting the family. Literate women in Pakistan's future will raise their own standard of living, and their standard of life will be enhanced through knowledge and participation in an expanding world. Pakistan's Social Welfare Department, Women's Programs, under the "All Pakistan Women's Association," has begun a variety of activities which will help to create the means to educate women. With grants from the Pakistan government, the Ford Foundation, CARE, and United Nations agencies, a beginning has been made to train rural teacher who will provide formal and non-formal education programs for women. These and other programs now beginning in Pakistan are creating change and hope for many women. Programs such as those mentioned above are actively seeking proposals for development assistance through education from universities, funding agencies, and individuals who have interest in this vital area of development.

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