

## Where were you, dear sisters?

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The failure of their representatives to articulate public concern has upset women. — APP/File Photo

**Much has been said about the shameful performance of our parliament on April 13 when it approved the controversial Nizam-i-Adl Regulation without much of a murmur.**

The two members who protested, MQM's Farooq Sattar and the PML-N MNA from Chakwal, Ayaz Amir, have received much-deserved accolades — albeit given grudgingly to the MQM. But why did the others lose their voice? What happened to the women?

Why could not there be a full-fledged debate on an issue that promises to have a profound impact on the future of Pakistan? Its devastating implications for women have already started manifesting themselves, as demonstrated by reports from Karachi of men walking up to women demanding that they cover themselves 'properly'. A woman even complained of having been threatened with a gun. These incidents vindicate the fears that have been expressed in women's circles about the tidal wave of Talibanisation sweeping the country.

It was the failure — or helplessness — of our parliamentarians that was disturbing. It is now clear that military rule and pseudo democracy under the patronage of the army have wrought untold ravages on Pakistan's political institutions over the years, undermining democratic structures so badly that even the restoration of democracy has not revived their working fully.

The failure of their representatives to articulate public concern on that fateful day has upset women all over the country. It has prompted an angry email from Lila Thadani of the Sindh Adyoon Tehrik, Sukkur, charging Bushra Gohar and Nafisa Shah (MNAs from the ANP and the PPP respectively) of acting for the sake of party 'loyalty and transitory power.'

She says, 'Remember dear sisters, your parliamentary slots will not remain for life. You will have to climb down and be with the rest of us. How will you be able to face us and the true reality after selling your soul to power? ... Speak up or ship out, now. You are better outside than inside that pointless white cube of a parliament on Constitution Ave.'

It was, therefore, seen as a weak and belated rescue attempt when a female voice was raised in the house the next day. Sherry Rehman, the PPP MNA who recently bowed out as the information minister, made a spirited speech on a point of order expressing strong reservations about the implementation of the Nizam-i-Adl Regulation 2009 in Swat. Conceding that this system had been in force in the valley in the 1990s, she pointed out that circumstances were different then.

The state had executive control over the land unlike today when the writ of the ANP government doesn't run there. She had a point when she said angrily, 'I ask the ANP, which pressured the government to pass the regulation in the National Assembly, to tell us who will protect the rights of women in Swat now.'

Sherry also asked for a debate on the flogging incident, saying this act had been in clear violation of the laws of the land and pointed to the danger of people being subjected to Taliban vigilantism and public brutality. Yes Sherry's fear is spot on — for this is exactly what worries people, mainly women, today, but not the parliamentarians who have yet to debate the flogging incident. Why the delay?

This question is to an extent answered by Aurat Foundation's report, Performance of Women Parliamentarians in the 12th National Assembly, launched recently. It sheds some light on the attitudes of our lawmakers and confirms the non-role of the National Assembly in Pakistan's system of governance. Sifting through a mountain of National Assembly records to collect data and statistics, Naeem Mirza and Wasim Wagma, the authors of the report, have made a monumental contribution to the recording of parliamentary history.

No analysis is needed to show the shoddy performance of the Assembly that functioned in 2002-2007. Figures speak louder than words. Here is some striking statistical information taken from the report: The assembly held a total of only 43 sessions in five years and met on 608 working days. It failed to fulfill the minimum requirement of 130 days in the final year when it met on 83 days.

This information does not reveal the entire truth for each day's session on an average lasted for less than an hour in the first year and two hours in the following years. Sixty-eight times the quorum was not complete and only 50 bills were passed in five years (mostly without a debate) of which 38 became acts. The 12th assembly may have operated under the shadows of a military dictatorship but this does not exonerate parliamentarians for their indifferent performance.

The report focuses on women and their efforts to preserve the public space they have created for themselves in politics. It sheds light on the grit of a handful of women parliamentarians (60 on reserved seats and 13 on general seats) in a house of 342 who took bold initiatives and struggled against heavy odds to make their presence felt. The assessment of women parliamentarians is purely in quantitative terms.

They emerge as an active lot who spoke prolifically (3,698 interventions), questioned sensibly (2,724 questions) and took their responsibilities seriously. But who were these women? The report grades the first 25. And is it surprising that of these 22 were from the opposition parties? Now that the boot is on the other foot their parliamentary activism has been muted. The MMA women who continue to sit on the opposition benches admit that they do not believe in challenging the male public space.

What is needed is an analysis of the role of women parliamentarians in the context of the freedom allowed to them. Evidently at the root of the problem is the flawed mode of election of women legislators on reserved seats. Appointed from party lists, they are denied a constituency while their fate is in the hands of the party leadership, predominantly male. Since women parliamentarians are unwilling to join hands across party lines on issues concerning women there is no hope that their problems will be resolved through political processes.

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