

Working with the State to Secure Rural Women's Rights

Akua Britwum Speaks with Rizwana Waraich

Akua Britwum speaks with Rizwana Waraich of Pakistan virtually, on Tuesday the 4th of May 2021. Rizwana is a board member of the Lok Sanjh Foundation, an NGO based in rural Pakistan, and also works as a freelance consultant. In this interview, she reveals the struggles with contradictions within state support structures that are supposed to defend women's rights, in a situation where the players themselves are steeped in patriarchal values.

Akua Opokua Britwum (AOB): I would like to ask you to talk about yourself and how you became involved in gender activism and what you are doing now.

Rizwana Waraich (RW): Yeah! Mine is an interesting story. Right after getting my masters in English literature in 1991 from Punjab University, Lahore, I started my career as an English teacher in a private school in Lahore. There, I met Asmar Janvir, a famous human rights activist of Pakistan who introduced me to Chandhi Joshi, the regional director of UN Women in Pakistan. After two and a half hours of our first meeting, she asked me to join UNIFEM. It was a surprise because I had no idea about UNIFEM, or the UN system. So, I said, "What job do I have to do?" She said, "You have to work for women.". Then I said, "Oh, I cannot work for women!" She replied, "I saw something in you and if you like, we would like to hire you." I didn't take it seriously, but in February 1992, I was appointed to the position of Community Organisation Officer in a UNIFEM and UNDP joint project with the Department of Fisheries in Punjab, titled "Integrated Development of Women and Youth of Fisherfolk in Punjab.". That was the first time I came to know about women's issues.

When I started work with UNIFEM, I had no gender awareness due to my feudal background. The women's issues I came across inspired me a lot and many people I met sensitised me and changed my whole life. Initially, it was quite difficult for me, but gradually, I started taking interest. My first project, a one-and-a-half-year project, was the most successful and after that I did not go back to teach.

I have worked with a lot of organisations, INGOs, NGOs in almost all sectors – humanitarian and development, agriculture, health, HIV and AIDS, water, transportation. I am a member of several national and international human and women's rights groups, and a supporter of the MeToo campaign. I have contributed to events such as playing a lead role and providing the required technical support information for the institutionalisation of Gender and Child Cell (GCC) in National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Pakistan, in three provinces – Sindh, Balochistan, and Punjab – and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. I was also involved in events conducted under Ending Violence Against Women/Girls Alliance, Pakistan.

Most of my work is in collaboration with state departments where I try to ensure that all the government-oriented projects adopt a gender-inclusive approach. Although they have adopted several international programmes on gender and acknowledge them, in actual fact, they just put a chapter in the project document and stop there. I am trying to ensure mainstreaming gender at every step in the project document and still I am struggling about that, and they are always saying, "Oh, why are you doing this?" Then I say, it is not understood that women are there, women must be mentioned in the project document and in the implementation process. Sensitising the state officials, initially, was very hard but now they are accepting, and encountering me in different stages. I am not alone here, most of Pakistani feminists and gender experts are facing this kind of problem.

AOB: What is the situation of Pakistani women in relation to the issues that your work addresses?

RW: Unfortunately, in Pakistan today not all men enjoy the rights and facilities they are entitled to; women are, however, doubly disadvantaged by poverty and gender. Demographically, females are 47.5% of the Pakistani population, but they have a lower life expectancy of 54 years compared to 55 for men – a reflection of the poorer nutrition, hard physical labour, and high levels of maternal mortality. Pakistan has adopted several key international commitments to gender equality and women’s rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, and the Sustainable Development Goals. Pakistani women were granted suffrage at independence in 1947 and have participated actively in parliamentary politics. There were reserved seats for women in the Parliament from 1956 to 1973 and they can contest elections as independent candidates, or into the reserved quota.

Gender issues are being gradually addressed and there has been some change. Thus, women’s position is gradually improving; a lot of women are on top. Women are increasingly participating in the political system at all levels. In Senate, national assembly, provincial assemblies, even at local bodies, [but] their number remains lower than men. Achieving their goal in a patriarchal Pakistan society remains a challenge; it is not easy in an Islamic country like Pakistan. The men are very sharp. I don’t mean clever, but if they have justification for women’s empowerment, they listen to us. What they do not like is a woman who confronts them, questions them, and is trying to work for women’s empowerment.

AOB: What legislations have had a direct impact on the work you do?

RW: Some national commitments in place include National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women, National Plan of Action on Human Rights, Gender Equality Policy Frameworks, and Women’s Empowerment Packages and Initiatives. Till the 1973 constitution, most of the laws were constituted on an ad-hoc basis. The constitution is the major legislation that affects women’s legal rights in Pakistan. Some of the major laws that are used to promote women’s rights nowadays are those regulating dowries and bridal gifts, sexual harassment in the workplace, anti-women practices, and domestic violence. Pakistan also has laws protecting the rights of transgender persons.

Despite all these commitments, Pakistan's ranking for gender equality remains one of the lowest in the world.

AOB: Have you been involved in any legislative reform in Pakistan?

RW: In Pakistan, I took part in passing of laws for the:

- Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill (2009);
- Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2010);
- Protection Against Harassment of Women in the Workplace Act (2010);
- Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011).

However, I and other women's rights activists and bodies are still working on the implementation of these laws, on some further changes to make them more appropriately applicable.

AOB: What are some of the challenges with the law that your work has had to deal with?

RW: Women's status in Pakistan is still disappointing due to the inadequate implementation of pro-women legislation. These laws are very useful whenever they need to be used. The issue is their proper application. The national data on violence against women in Pakistan remains gloomy. There are many reasons. First, the people are not aware of the laws; they are not properly sensitised. Most of the implementation bodies – especially law enforcement bodies the police, the judiciary, and other law enforcement agencies – are not aware of women-friendly laws and regulations and are not that much gender sensitised.

One of the main problems is that Pakistan is a multi-cultural society, so different anti-women practices exist. In Pakistan, religious practices and cultural norms exist that hinder the achievement of women's rights. All of these practices and norms have their own explanations, so this difference makes the situation complicated in the context of women's rights. As a religious society, different kinds of techniques must be adopted in order to motivate the people and provide examples. Not all the women activists are well equipped in this.

The role of the media is also not that encouraging. Although some changes in the media's attitude towards women's issues have been observed, it is still not enough. In some instances where gender activists have organised campaigns for women's rights, such as the Aurat March on International Women's Day, social media has been used to spread disinformation against the organisers and their supporters, creating unsafe and often violent encounters for us women's rights activists. They also face extremist backlash, especially during street protests where they are accused of spreading "obscenity and vulgarity."

I have faced numerous challenges at the workplace and community level, and when working for the enactment of the laws. It is quite difficult for men to give equal space to women; even the highly educated men are equally biased in this regard. The challenges are there but overcoming them becomes your success. Being a women's rights activist is still part of the struggle to achieve women's rights in a real sense; working steadily often wins [in the long run].

We are working on this, and most women's rights organisations focus on raising awareness about these laws. I am part of the campaign focusing on making these laws more implementable. It is not easy; all of us women's rights activists are struggling. It is a gradual kind of thing and steadily, we work with different levels of people at the government level, the private sector, the city level, the village level, and in this way, we convey the message. In Pakistan, we organise different radio programmes although radio is not that much in practise nowadays. Besides, we use television and drama to convey the message. We are working on that, now the situation is better compared to when I started my career in 1992. Now there is flexibility on the side of men but they are saying, "We are being exploited by the women, our wives are exploiting us."

AOB: So, there was an initial resistance, but you won the men round. And now they are pushing back again?

RW: Even today in Pakistan, apparently, men are acknowledging the rights of women. But in practice, there are still several challenges women have to face to gain equal space in the male dominating society. The men are not pushing directly, they are pushing very technically, and you must understand those technicalities.

AOB: How are they doing this?

RW: Okay, we say [we need] community involvement, community participation especially women and minority participation. When you talk about that, they say, “No! Community participation means everyone can participate, there is no need to mention women participation especially.” During my study in UN Women, I came to know of a very interesting approach of men and women who are sitting at the high level, in executive positions. One man said that a woman in high position should not need gender sensitisation, she is in that position and it is assumed that she should [already] be gender sensitive. Interestingly the woman said, “Yeah, it is okay [if] we make a mistake, we don’t have to do [gender sensitisation].” I said, “No, you are sitting in the high position, you can do what we cannot do. [But] just because you are sitting in a high position does not mean you are gender sensitive, you have to be gender sensitised [i.e. to understand gender issues], and you have to continue your work of gender mainstreaming processes in all the projects of the government.” It does not mean that simply because she is a woman, she is gender sensitive. There are a lot of women in Pakistan who are not gender sensitive. Even the women from the upper class, the high-class women, they are not gender sensitive because they are from powerful families. Sometimes, they use Islam, our religion, sometimes Hindu, to explain religion from their own perspectives.

AOB: Which prime movers of change for women’s rights in Pakistan do you consider important for your work?

RW: I have been moved by three prominent women political figures – Mohatrama Fatima Jinnah, Rana Liaqat Ali (the pioneer of feminism in Pakistan), and Benazir Bhutto, former Pakistani prime minister. I am also really impressed by Chandni Joshi, Alice Shakelford, Fareeda Shaheed, Asma Jahangir, Kishwar Naheed, and Khawar Mumtaz because of their qualities and dedication to promoting women and supporting women’s rights organisations. Among the African women movements, I am impressed by Maame Afon Yelbert-Obeng from Ghana, as she has been working to improve the lives of women and girls across Sub-Saharan Africa. The famous feminist scholar, researcher, and activist Aisha Fofana Ibrahim’s work is also very impressive.

AOB: What have been your high points in the work you do?

RW: My work in the formation, strengthening, and institutionalising of grass-roots organisations at the rural and urban level. This includes the formation of Gender Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Networks (GRRN), and the GCC at NDMA. My work with the mobilisation of rural women transforms them into feminist activists. All this work gives me more energy and encourages me to go forward to do something extraordinary for women while working with them.

AOB: What events led to the formation of the GCC group?

RW: The GCC was formed and institutionalised at NDMA and became a platform to ensure gender mainstreaming in the policies, programmes, and work of NDMA. The creation of the GCC helped the government to shift from a policy approach, based on how people cope with GBV in disasters, to a risk management approach focusing on the development, implementation, and maintenance of emergency SGBV programmes. My experience with NDMA has been very challenging and we had to deal with our top civil bureaucracy. I was working with UN Women at that moment, and it was difficult even when we presented ourselves as gender specialists or gender advisers. Do you know how they behaved with us in the Prime Minister's secretariat? They put our seats at the reception, and we had to struggle for three months to get a room for our gender section. The General said, "What rubbish gender equality is this? I have no idea about that." Gradually we motivated him; we talked to him, and finally, after six months, he became one of our advocates of gender equality and those kinds of things. So, you must focus on a powerful person sometimes to convey your message. There are a lot of means that gender experts must adopt. To work on gender mainstreaming, we should work on relations and confidence building, otherwise it will be difficult.

AOB: And your lowest point?

RW: When I feel that I cannot work for women in a particular situation – that brings me down. Recently during Aurat on 8 March 2021, International

Women's Day, the behaviour of media and religious groups brought me to the lowest point. When I was not able to work for women in tanneries, that situation upset me and compelled me to leave that position because of the autocratic behaviour of the personnel of the public sector departments.

AOB: What do you hope to achieve in future?

RW: I have a list of wishes. I want to work for women who are facing war situations continuously, in conflict situations like Kashmir and Palestine – all women who are facing such situations across the globe, without any religious and cultural bias. I have dreams that women will become economically independent and empowered; totally self-made, without any support from and exploitation by men. I want more women's voices and representation in all spheres of life: politically, socially, and economically, enjoying equal wages and respect. There will be a world free of all kinds of violence.

AOB: What do you hope to see in future for women in Pakistan and Asia? What is your most fervent wish for women in Africa and Asia, women everywhere?

RW: I am quoting one of the statements which I heard in Afghanistan, when I asked one woman, "After five years, where do you see you women?" She is a rice farmer. She started weeping and said, "I wish my country would be free from the foreign armies and my male family members would come back home and live with us. Our lives would be saved; we would not be raped. I wish that these foreigners would leave our country so we can live independently, live a happy life and I could go to Hajj." In the same way, I wish women would be saved from all the exploiters; women should be out of all the exploitation. I wish that in future, women would live secure, economically independent and sustainable lives. Women must respect women, women must support women, women should work with women. Today it is not that way, but I wish that it would happen.

I wish that the world would be free, secure, and full of pleasure for all women, especially in Ghana and Pakistan, Africa, and Asia. That women could spend their life according to their will, discrediting all the kinds of

fundamentalist ideology that underlies violence against women and vulnerable people. All international laws and human rights instruments should work to end the discrimination against weak segments of people. Women of the world must provide space to define and shape their own sexuality [in] a society that is free from all forms of violence, where there is access to products and services for women's sexual and reproductive health needs. Women's rights are everyone's business. I also wish that all feminists and women human rights defenders would be more than just numbers and would become a force to confront patriarchy in all spheres of life.

AOB: Let me have your last words.

RW: My message to other women activists and gender specialists is, please support your fellow women and encourage them to be empowered and to be strong. Women have to stand for each other; they have to work for each other. That is the only way we can get results. All women's rights organisations should make weak women strong. There are a lot of religious groups – Hindu, Islam, they are using their women upfront to exploit the woman who is working for women's rights.

AOB: And you think that there is a danger here?

RW: There could be a danger. [...] Men are very clever and already men create confrontations among the women. I observed in Pakistan and also heard from my Indian friends and even in Afghanistan, that there are various religious groups and women's rights groups confronting each other. It is everywhere. We women have to be careful in this regard.

AOB Thank you very much, I am really very grateful for your time, and how freely you have shared your experience with me.