

Womanly affair

# Sharing memories of tyrannical era

Women rights' activists recall their experiences and discuss the plight of women

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Women in rural areas were not forgotten on the eve of National Women's Day.

"Instead of celebrating women's day in cities, we should go to the rural areas and make the women there aware of their rights as human beings," suggested Chairperson of National Assembly Standing Committee on Law and Justice Naseem Chaudhry, talking at the Pakistan National Council of the Arts on Friday.

"The main reason behind the increase in violence against women is that they are illiterate. So they easily become victims of social taboos," Chaudhry said, adding, "It is impossible to completely eliminate violence against women, but there is a dire need to educate our men."

She was making these observations at an event organised by the National Commission on Status of Women (NCSW) in collaboration with Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy, Aurat Foundation and Pakistan Television to celebrate February 12.

Last year, the government declared this day as National Women's Day. On the same day in 1983, women took to the streets to protest and challenge the promulgation of the Law of Evidence by the military dictator Ziaul Haq.

Sharing her experiences of that fateful day, Executive Director Sungi Development Foundation Samina Khan said, "I reached the spot from where the protest had to begin with full confidence. But when I saw the batons of the women police waving at us, my legs began to shake and my heart started pounding."

Khan was among one of those courageous women who actively participated in the protest and faced various forms of police brutality.

"As we reached Mall Road, we found ourselves in a battle field as the police started shell-

ing us with tear gas. We were all taken to a police station," she said.

Shahnaz Wazir Ali, Special Adviser to the Prime Minister on Social Sector told the gathering, "I remember it was a time when we did not even have an office where we could gather and plan our fight for our rights. We only had a box which contained newspaper clippings and some important documents."

She added, "It was and still is a long journey. Our women should be aware of their rights and confident enough to fight for them."

Rehana from Chakwal said that she belonged to a village where there was no concept of women's education. Yet, she was forced by her family to stand in local elections. "They used me to get the seat. I did not know how to fight for the rights of others."

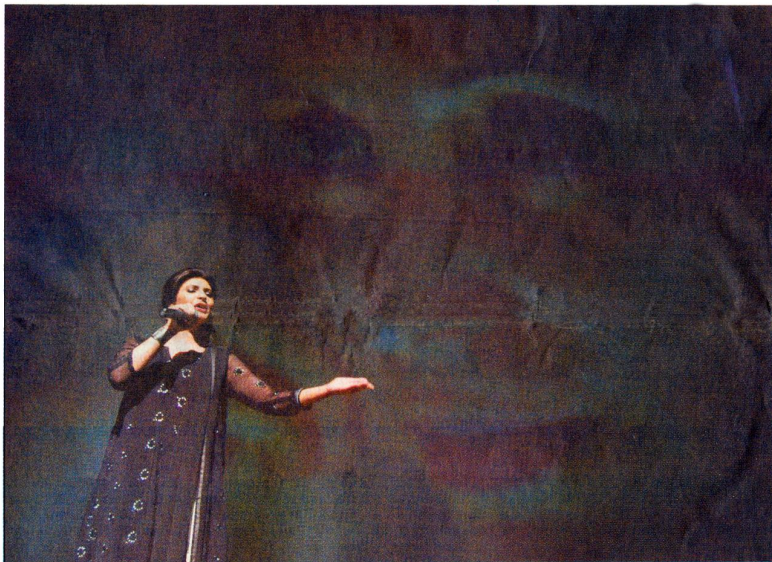
Nasreen Nasir from C-B, who was honoured with Tamgha-e-Shujaat for saving the lives of 23 officials during clashes in her region, said that the award was a true honour for her as it is almost always men who are considered for it.

Suraiya Mansoor from Gujarmala, upon deciding to contest elections, was insensitively questioned by her counsellor, "Have you seen your face in the mirror?"

NCSW Chairperson Anis Haroon said it was very unfortunate that some people always brought religion into any discussion of women's rights. She stressed the need for more family and women protection laws to empower women.

Renowned activist Tahira Abdullah said, "The women's rights movement is in a sad situation of one step forward and two steps back. People are afraid to talk about discriminatory and unjust laws."

To end, they ensured full commitment and unity for their fight, followed by a rendition of "hum dekhein ge" by Fareeha Pervez.



TWO BIRDS, ONE STONE: Fareeha Pervez sings Faiz's "hum dekhein ge" at PNCA on Friday. PHOTO: MUHAMMAD IWAID

## NATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

### Chaley chalo ki woh manzil abhi nahi ayee



#### Long road ahead

Shehnaaz Wazir Ali, Special Adviser to the Prime Minister on Social Sector: "It was and still is a long journey. I believe in democracy. Our country's women should be well aware of their rights and should be confident enough to fight for them"



#### Why only in cities?

Naseem Chaudhry, Chairperson of National Assembly Standing committee on Law and Justice: "Instead of celebrating Women's Day in big cities, we should go to the rural areas and make the women there aware of their rights as human beings."



#### Muddled discourse

Anees Haroon Chairperson NCSW: It is very unfortunate that some people always bring religion into any discussion of women's rights. She stressed the need for more family and women protection laws to empower women.



#### Hopscotch

Tahira Abdullah, well-know rights activist: The women's rights movement is in a sad situation of one step forward and two steps back. People are afraid to talk about discriminatory and unjust laws.

## Reflecting on the highs and lows

'Much has been done but much still needs to be done'

MARYAM USMAN  
ISLAMABAD

It all began on February 12, 1983, when outspoken lawyers, doctors and activists stood up against the discriminatory treatment meted out to women in the country.

"It wasn't like the way people struggle these days. That movement stood for education of women, alleviation of poverty," reminisced Rights and Social Activist Nageen Hyat, who was part of the movement back then.

They were protesting against cutting education to girls, schools being bombed, teachers being victimised and killed, and the imposition of burqa in wake of the so-called

'Islamisation' of Pakistan.

The movement was instigated by Women's Action Forum, founded by Hyat in 1981, after Fahmida and Allah Bukh were sentenced and stoned to death under the Zina Ordinance.

The security forces tried to silence their voices by charging them with batons and throwing them in the lockup. But their voices were not crushed, and the day went down in history as "National Women's Day". The day reflects the force used by women representatives for acquisition of their legal rights.

Commemorating the day, Aurat Foundation and Oxfam-GB jointly organised an event to pay tribute to "Women's Leadership at Grassroots Level: Actions & Achievements" on Friday at Islamabad Hotel. Prominent

social figures including Asma Jehangir, Nageen Hyat and Dr Samina Khan among others actively participated in the event.

Hyat said, "Most laws are un-Islamic and against women and minorities. The Islamisation process was forced upon the nation from 1979 onwards and the Hadood Ordinance with its retrogressive measures became firmly entrenched in Pakistan's political and legal system.... Change can come only through education."

Mukhtarani Mai, the chief guest and an icon of struggle and courage in Pakistan and abroad, shared snippets of her poignant struggle, "I'm uneducated and hail from a conservative and average origin where women do not have a strong social or financial status.

"I did not even know what organisation meant before 2002, when I mustered up the courage to form my own. We all know what happened. Yet I was fortunate enough to meet educated women through the foundation. They lent me support and I mustered the courage to stand up. Today I've built a school, a shelter home and a resource centre for girls."

Aurat Foundation had invited representatives of groups of women leaders to share their stories of struggle for gender equality and political rights with women from grassroots invited at the event.

Women's Leaders Group comprises fifty women leaders from thirty districts of Pakistan, who are provided leadership training by the foundation.

The foundation's Chief

Executive Office Naeeem Mirza started by narrating the story of injustice and violence against Haleema Bhutto. He read out an appeal by her, demanding justice. She said, "If they [the government] can't give me justice after sitting on Benazir's seat, then what good are they for?"

The session took a sombre air, moving many to tears. Haleema Bhutto, from Ghotki is currently entrenched in front of the National Press Club in Islamabad. In March 2010, her husband declared her kari, and the village panchayat declared her punishable by death. To save her life and struggle for justice, she came to Islamabad. She will remain persistent until justice comes.

Then representatives of the foundation from different cities gave in-depth accounts of

their activities and work for women.

Notably, Qamar Bano from Jacobabad founded the Madina Welfare Centre to cater to women with disabilities and teach their skills.

Another centre for education and skills' development in Rawalpindi has so far registered 600-700 girls, who will get educated till matriculation, according to Razia Sultana, the foundation's representative from Rawalpindi.

Women might have marked the day as their own, but their fight is far from over. Women still face numerous threats and dangers in the name of honour, said an emotional Dr Amna Solangi. Similarly Supreme Court Advocate Sarkar Abbas highlighted the discrimination being faced by female lawyers, especially in elections in bar associations.