

## **Women protection law wins acclaim**

LAHORE: People from all walks of life have welcomed the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Bill passage in the Punjab Assembly, with some of them criticising the MPAs “who objected to certain clauses”.

The Bill was passed on Wednesday after remaining pending since May 2015.

One PPP MPA who sat through the assembly session was Faiza Malik, who herself had moved a Domestic Violence Bill in 2012, which differed in the sense that it aimed to protect all vulnerable persons living under the same roof. These included domestic help, children and elderly persons. However, these are not included in the current bill.

Ms Malik fully supported the bill that came through the Social Welfare Department.

“The Bill is originally drafted by Salman Sufi who launched a ‘Violence against Women Centre’ (VAWC) in Multan, where the idea is to have protection and rehabilitation of the women survivors or victims under one roof, including medical counseling and checkups, police procedures and also basic legal documentation,” she said.

She said “the men in the assembly, especially from the PTI, were the most to cause an issue.” “They were of the view that the bill would cause domestic and family problems, and would interfere with personal issues. They also said divorce rates would go up. It is unbelievable the kind of attitude we have among lawmakers. One male MPA even said to me that religion allows women to be beaten up and that she has no right to let the news out of the house.”

When asked why other PPP MPAs did not appear, she said most lived out of Lahore and were usually absent, and said many other party members were also not present. From the PPP she and Mian Khurram Jahangir Wattou were the only ones present. She specified that the members were not told beforehand about the bill, and that was one reason why they were not present.

“The PTI members did not even want to discuss the bill and state their reservations,” she said referring to her own discussions with some of them.

Human rights lawyer Ali Imran, who was present in the assembly’s Speaker Box on Wednesday, said that in particular one of the reservations that caused an issue was the clause that said a court could order a GPS tracker to be installed to monitor movement of the defendant, in case he was accused of an act of grave violence or was deemed likely to be committed.

“Some of the male MPAs found this very derogatory,” he said. “In fact, even the ruling party had trouble finding support. There was an issue of quorum in the assembly as members were very few.”

He said there was dissent over another clause according to which in order to protect “life, dignity and reputation of the aggrieved, a woman protection officer (WPO) may direct the defendant to move out of the house for 48 hours.

Aurat Foundation Resident Director Mumtaz Mughal said the bill had originally come into the assembly in April and was approved by the cabinet in May and in the same month returned to the assembly, but since then it had taken a very long time to be passed. She said the bill had originally been an executive order but now was a legal order and this protected its status.

“We had worked on a bill in 2008 at the National Assembly level, but after the devolution took place a new bill for Punjab had to be introduced,” she said.

“Sindh and Balochistan assemblies had passed similar bills but did not have a good implementation mechanism, so we learnt from that and though the definition of domestic violence was not included, there are various forms of violence that the bill aims to protect against.”

PTI MPA Shunila Ruth says that while they did not embrace the bill, they did not oppose it either. “I do admit the running thought of most men in the assembly is that they feel they are being plotted against,” she admitted.

SP Nabila Ghanzanfar endorsed not just the bill but also the VAWCs that it supports. “We have launched women-friendly front desks in about 10 police stations, but the complaint will still be handled later by investigation wings that have the same chauvinistic attitude,” she says.

“But this makes life very easy for a woman complainant and eventually more women will become aware of their rights.”

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