

Women's NGOs in Pakistan

Reviewed by David Waterman

Women's NGOs in Pakistan. Afshan Jafar. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 192 pages. ISBN: 978-0-230-11320-6.

Among the many publications that deal with NGOs, and transnational civil society more generally, Afshan Jafar's contribution to the debate – *Women's NGOs in Pakistan* – manages to escape the dichotomies that characterize the subject (state versus non-state, for example) and “instead place[s] the activities, visions, and agendas of women's NGOs in their historical, political, cultural, and social context” (2). No easy task in a country like Pakistan, where the formula as concerns women in the public sphere is very complicated indeed, and where outspoken women risk apathy and criticism at best, and frequently ostracism and violence if they continue their activities. Idealism must confront realities on the ground, compromises must be agreed to if progress is to be made in conservative societies, and a balance must be found between feminism on the one hand and religion on the other; opting out of the religious question in The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is simply not possible. Professor Jafar, a sociologist at Connecticut College, does an admirable job of presenting the specificities – women, NGOs, and Pakistan – of women's NGOs in Pakistan.

Jafar begins with a long introduction, setting the context of NGO evolution in a world in which the state is less and less involved in matters like education and health care, as well as the necessary growth of human rights advocacy NGOs amid a resurgence of conservatism and nationalism in spite of globalization's promises. For the reader unfamiliar with contemporary Pakistani history, Chapter 1 provides an overview since Partition, although the real shift in the treatment of women began not in 1947, as Jafar rightly suggest, but in 1977, with Zia ul-Haq's accession to power. Although the condition of women in pre-1977 Pakistan was not ideal, the foundation of the All-Pakistan Women's Foundation and the passage of the Family Law ordinance, as well as the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, show that women's voices were being heard in the political sphere (25-26). Speaking out, however, would become more difficult under Zia, whose political islamization of the country would be catastrophic for nearly everyone, but women in particular. Vigilante vice squads, the Hudood Ordinances, deepening philosophies of women as

property and the guardians of male honor, all would target women in the name of Islam. Jafar notes that, paradoxically, women's activism peaked during the Zia regime, notably under the banner of the Women's Action Forum (39). Prime ministers after Zia, even Benazir Bhutto, have done little or nothing to improve women's lot, and Nawaz Sharif is singled out for his anti-NGO stance (43). Since September 11, 2001 and the war on terror, many fundamentalist groups have been increasing their memberships with anti-American rhetoric, and NGOs often suffer in the crossfire, being seen as representing American interests (46).

Chapter 2 then places feminism in the context of fundamentalism, and the various strategies that must be adopted in response, keeping in mind that women and girls who seek education and an active role in society are most often the target of the extremists' wrath. Jafar lists six of the possible responses of women's NGOs to fundamentalism: reinterpreting the Quran; networking and establishing ties with the religious community; using religion strategically; becoming isolated and self-censoring; joining fundamentalist organizations; using and advancing secular thought and arguments (58). The following chapter then outlines some of the campaigns aimed at increasing women's political participation, beginning with the Aurat Foundation, which operates at all three levels: grassroots, community and policy making. At the grassroots level, the AF's mission is to "develop women's control over knowledge, including knowledge about resources and institutions and focuses primarily on the information needs of the women of the low income households" (76). AF also supports citizen's action committees and legislative watchdog groups, but must adapt to local traditions; for example, in some areas publications cannot be mailed directly to a woman, as it is considered improper to put a woman's name on an envelope (77; 81). Another way that women's NGOs have to "package" their message and become trustworthy among the locals is by not addressing women's issues all by themselves, but instead link women's issues with education, income generation and health care (91).

Sexual harassment is the subject of the next-to-last chapter, using the rights-based approach of Action Aid as an example, an NGO that operates in social, legal, economic and political rights as well as community development (99). Jafar reports that Action Aid, because it addresses the sensitive issue of sexual harassment in the workplace, is the most radical of the NGOs she encountered in Pakistan; she also remarks that there is no exact word or phrase in Urdu for sexual harassment, thus highlighting the fact that such harassment is not seen as extraordinary (100-101). Ultimately AA's hard work paid off in a policy document entitled "Code of Conduct for Gender Justice in the Workplace,"

followed up by workshops designed to dispel myths regarding sexual harassment, including the mentality of blaming the victim, or seeing sexual harassment as normal from a cultural point of view (104). The final bill against harassment of women in the workplace was signed by President Zardari in 2010 (123). The final chapter then examines the unfulfilled promise of NGOs, especially in their complex and sometimes contradictory relation with the State. NGOs not only suffer from external challenges, especially in a conservative country like Pakistan, but Jafar also calls attention to other challenges faced by NGOs, whether in Pakistan or elsewhere: charges of elitism, unhealthy competition and rivalries (especially between advocacy and service NGOs), lack of networks and such, not to mention natural catastrophes which have struck Pakistan in recent years. Jafar ends on a cautiously optimistic note, showing that although some statistics for literacy and infant mortality are headed in the right direction, there is still much work to be done, and much of this work must be done by NGOs. The question is not only how to advance the cause of women, but how to do so in the context of poverty, political instability and traditional patriarchal and religious customs. Professor Jafar then concludes her book with a detailed note on her methodology and fieldwork, with an annex of the Workplace Act and extensive bibliography. Afshan Jafar's *Women's NGOs in Pakistan* will be of interest not only to scholars and students, but activists at all levels, from grassroots to federal policymaking, especially as proof that women's NGOs can and do flourish in some of the most improbable places.