

Analysis: Khwaja Asif exists in parliaments globally

By Zeenia Shaukat

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Defence Minister Khawaja Asif's recent remarks against Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf MNA Shireen Mazari reminded everyone of the ugly sexism women in parliament and politics deal with daily, in their work life. Politicians are generally easy target of public mudslinging by their opponents. However, women politicians face an added disadvantage for the specific gendered image and roles attached to them. If they seek to be equal partners in politics, despite their low headcount, their opponents have a wide variety of tools to "put them in place". These may range from remarks directed at their physical appearance to smear campaigns, including doctored images circulated on the media. It is no surprise the most vocal women parliamentarians in Pakistan have been repeatedly targeted by this vulgar mentality. The credit goes to the likes of Benazir Bhutto, Sherry Rehman, Marvi Memon, Shazia Marri, Sharmila Farooqi and many others for not giving in to this blackmailing.

Sexism targeting women in politics and legislature also demonstrates the patriarchal mind-set's refusal to accept of women as partners in political sphere. The 89 women in Pakistan's senate and national assembly are major contributors to the agenda of the House. Last year, they presented 22 out of 26 private members bill, demonstrating their seriousness towards legislative business. They passionately push the cause of anti-violence, health, education, environment and governance. Performance-wise, they shine in each annual report on parliament's conduct. Yet their "utility" is repeatedly questioned, indicating affirmative action facilitating their participation in legislature is still seen as charity and a matter of male privilege.

Female parliamentarians' struggle for equality

Sexism is ingrained in most parliaments of the world. It is obvious in the case of US democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's struggle to gracefully handle her political rival Donald Trump's utterly sexist tirade against her. Unfortunately, horror stories abound in the parliaments of countries projecting themselves as torchbearers of democracy.

Early this year, Canadian Parliamentarian Michelle Rempel wrote an article describing sexism characterising her country's politics. She recounts her regular experience of being talked down by her male colleagues and occasional touching of her body to shock her into submission. In the UK, while female MPs continue to demand that new mothers be allowed to breastfeed in the House of Commons chamber, their battle with sexism is yet to find a legal recourse. Two years ago, Green MP Caroline Lucas was quoted as saying male politicians discuss what women in the chamber are wearing. Another senior MP recalled her male colleague's remark about her "school girl figure".

In France, Housing Minister Cécile Duflot was heckled for her dressing while her male counterparts shamelessly asserted the wolf-whistles were "in tribute to her". Australia's first female Prime Minister

Julia Gillard was repeatedly subjected to sexism by her opponents over her conduct in politics as well as her life choices, including not having children.

Closer to home, Indian MPs have set new records of low vis-a-vis their female colleagues. This includes lecturing female parliamentarians on how to dress, watching pornography on their cell phones in the parliament and directing sexist jibes against celebrity parliamentarians, dismissing their work because of their so-called “disgraceful” past. Former actresses Smriti Irani and Jaya Parada find themselves at the receiving end of such comments.

In Sri Lanka, former-beauty-queen-turned-politician Rosy Senanayake was publicly gushed over by a senior Minister who responded to her parliamentary question with an outpour of remarks about her “beauty”. The sexist culture even extends to Africa that has fared much better than many developed countries on IPU index of women in parliament. Female African politicians continue to cite the presence of a male dominated political structure as a “problem”.

Stronger legislation for better collaboration

Those who observe it and those who suffer from it link sexism in politics to inherent social and cultural bias against women. It comes from the centuries old domination of the narrative that confines women to the boundaries of home. Women’s invisibility in public life and in politics, across all parts of the world, has further consolidated this culture. As the IPU index indicates, the progressive global north fares very poorly in terms of representation of women in the parliament.

As it is, politics is a difficult terrain irrespective of geography. A serious practicing politician needs to possess a wide range of soft and hard skills, own a comfortable level of financial resources and work extremely hard to keep up with the fast-paced marketplace of ideas, agendas and alliances. To burden women with an added responsibility to win family support to renegotiate her socially-defined role of a home-maker, and also fight sexism is an unfair proposition. The refusal of the political world to offer women a level playing field has repercussions in not only underrepresentation of half the population, it also erodes space for diverse ideas and perspectives that may add strength to any agenda setting and policy-making exercise. The damage is significantly serious as it concerns setting the direction of the state.

In terms of solution, there are no quick fixes. It is suggested that increasing the representation of women in politics may translate into greater visibility, which may go on to communicate a strength that cannot be downplayed by way of sexist remarks. Institutions such as caucuses or parliamentary groups also seek to act as support structures, although party politics is heavily at play at such forums.

Another way to deal with sexism is legislation. In 2012, as reported by the IPU, France, while criminalising sexual harassment, widened the definition of the term by including “intimidating, hostile or offensive” incidents. The same year, Malaysian parliament put a ban on sexist remarks in the House, prescribing a punishment of a reprimand or suspension for the violators.

These are examples of seriousness of policy-makers to address the biggest barrier to women's entry and effectiveness in politics. However, the inherent cultural bias, facilitating and rewarding such mentality, needs to be tackled by way of a focused discourse against sexism. And putting the onus of carrying out this task on women alone, simply because they are the victims here, is unfair. Rooting out a negative social culture is a shared responsibility. Male parliamentarians would be serving the cause of their institution if they step forward to collaborate.

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