

## **Ted Talk at Habib University**

**27 May 2017**

**Habib University Auditorium**

**Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yd0Xrp51Xw>**

### **Why struggle?**

Hi! I am Zeenia Shaukat. I am an independent professional. My work background relates to media, politics, legislation, rights institutions and a bit of academia. As much of my work involves working on social issues, I have had the opportunity to witness struggles and what they represent. I thought it would be good for me to talk about this topic as I have found myself asking questions about struggles that I have also found myself having to answer also.

We are well aware that much of the freedoms, rights and spaces that we enjoy today come on the back of intense, long-drawn struggles, a few documented and many unaccounted for. These struggles are riddled with stories of setbacks, disappointments, pain and heavy sacrifices. Many a times, the price paid in the process may not be worth the accolades received, nor any amount of documentation could articulate it.

However, it does raise the question we all need to ask ourselves: do we look at struggles from the yardstick of success they produce? Or do we celebrate the contribution of struggles as a journey that is more defined by its process rather than the outcome? In other words: is there any value in the power of the process? Most fundamentally: Why struggle?

In Pakistan, our everyday reality is marked by a constant state of internal conflict. This relates to the everyday life choices one makes, ranging from the time to step out of the house, the road to take, the person to marry, the livelihoods to pursue, and sadly, in today's social media times, the "comment" to make, and even the post to like.

It's the laws of the land, the management and administration of the systems, the executive institutions, the engagement of the citizens, and the responsiveness of the state that regulate these choices. These also define the freedoms we practice and the constraints we face.

But these systems don't come about because somebody dreamt them one night and executed them the next day. A whole gamut of our experiences concerning our relation with our state is an outcome of struggles that offer powerful stories with a unanimous moral: "It is important to go on".

I would like to present two examples before you. One relates to a collective action on resistance, spanning decades. The other could be described as a very personal story. Looking at both of them, I would urge you to revisit the question of how to judge struggles.

Did you know that as recently as ten years ago, if a woman was raped, and if she pursued justice, she would have to produce four males of “good moral standing” as witnesses to verify that she was indeed violated and hence suffered a crime for which a punishment needed to be meted out?

Five years after Pakistan’s regressive Hudood laws were passed in 1979, a blind twenty year old domestic worker Safia Bibi, found herself pregnant after being raped by her employer and his son. When Safia’s father filed a case, a punishment was given out. The punishment was for Safia: three years imprisonment, whipping, and a fine, for indulging in adultery. As she was pregnant and unmarried, so she must have done it out of wedlock. Moreover, she reported the rape case without being able to produce 4 adult male witnesses. On top of everything, she couldn’t see.

This was all thanks to the Hudood laws, set of controversial Islamic laws introduced by the Zia-ul-Haq regime. The biggest issue with laws, if I could put it simply, is that it treated rape and adultery as the same act, pronouncing rape victims as immoral adulterers deserving strict Islamic punishment.

Our talk is not exactly about Hudood laws, though we are still suffering the repercussions of the regressive regime these laws have unleashed.

What we do need to talk about is the resistance to this law. This was mostly manifested in Pakistan’s most important women’s movement, led by the Women Action Forum, that was founded in 1981 by a group educated urban middle class women. There were other movements too but for lack of time, we could look at WAF and what its struggle really did.

When WAF launched its resistance, it did not have much of a strategy. These bunch of women just kept on engaging. Expanding mobilization, launching into demonstrations, signature campaigns, writing, and employing every means to protest against the draconian measures that were becoming the reality of Pakistan.

This resistance generated powerful imagery, and what we call content, on these laws. However, as WAF charged ahead, rather than meeting their objective of Hudood Ordinance repeal, they found themselves faced with the challenges of laws such as the blasphemy law, the qanoon-e-shahdat, the qisas and diyat. And cases such as Safia bibi’s.

In this journey, as literature suggests, WAF found itself stalled at many instances. And like any collective action, a combination of people and situations ever so daunting to pull down. Yet, the minimum agenda remained. That the struggle had to carry on!

It took six government changes, almost 30 years of continuous struggle and countless battles with conservative forces for amendments in the Hudood Ordinance to happen, in the form of the Women Protection Act 2006. Even though WAF’s demand was the repeal of the Ordinance, in addition to all other regressive laws, it was the amendments that are cited as the most tangible example of the women’s movement’s struggle.

But is that how one should judge the movement? By a single outcome whose implementation is coming with much struggle. Is that all that the movement generated? My argument is, not really.

If you look at how rape was looked at back in the 70s and 80s, and how it is seen as now. It is the same? Back in 1983, the Council of Islamic Ideology recommended that women's participation in politics should be limited to nominated women over the age of fifty. Not much societal reaction. Last year the same CII said that husbands could give wives a light beating. And minutes after issuing this statement, they found themselves struggling to defend their pearls of wisdom.

Back in the 60s, Ayub Khan called Fatima Jinnah an Indian agent, and an unfeminine figure. Not much public reaction. When Benazir Bhutto was said the same things, there was strong public outcry. And today, we can leave it to the social media experts to do justice to anybody passing such ridiculous statements about women political leaders.

Where did all this difference in public opinion come from? And this, despite the fact that the character of the state remains anti rights, anti women and pro violence.

Can it not be attributed to the environment created by a consistent debate by a movement that could not keep quiet every time the word woman was referred to negatively. Through its dynamic skill set that comprised people excelling in journalism, theatre, the arts, law, social sciences, forensic sciences, poetry and film-making, WAF countered anti-women discourse at every possible level.

And surely the impact of these actions cannot be summarized in a mere set of amendments passed in the parliament. The impact is more evident in the rebuttal issued by a common person everytime women are discussed negatively. Had WAF not gone on, this may not have been the case.

My other example relates to an event most of us are familiar with.

On 24 April 2015, Sabeen Mahmud, Director T2F was killed in a cold blooded murder. Sabeen founded and ran T2F, through PeaceNiche, that promotes, "Intellectual Poverty Alleviation". T2F did and does this through offering its space as a platform for dialogue and creative expression.

T2F and Sabeen opened doors for possibilities for people who otherwise had limited options to find a way to explore their interests without paying a high cost, financial and otherwise.

When Sabeen was killed, seated right next to her mother Mahenaz Mahmud in a car she was driving home, the fate of this dialogue space depended much on how Mahenaz and the T2F team would choose to respond to this unimaginable crisis. We all know that between staying closed and re-opening, they chose the latter. And we all look up to them for opting this way. But do we have any idea what went behind those times?

Well firstly, this controversial murder meant that life was no longer the same for this institute as well as those working here and attached to Sabeen. There were innumerable police visits, identification parades of suspects, advices being showered upon for what to do, what to say, staff making an exit because they couldn't cope with the emotional stress of the tragedy, leadership crisis at the organization, and-for controversy's sake, I would also add political contestation.

For Mahenaz, this distress was compounded by the fact that apart from not being able to see her daughter ever again, she was left dealing with an unfamiliar environment of insecurity constantly reinforced by inconsiderate advisories to go incognito, handling an emotionally distressed T2F, struggling with making decisions that were always Sabeen's prerogative, being hassled in her daily life as her car and all the objects in it were confiscated as a crime property. On top of it all, she found herself being presented with her daughter's mobile phone bills months after Sabeen was gone; well because it was still in use while being under confiscation.

Though they had every good reason to not do so, but T2F re-opened in ten days after Sabeen's death. Mahenaz says she was compelled to go on and keep T2F open because T2F was envisioned as a community space by Sabeen and she had no right to act otherwise. Another important consideration was the blood, sweat and tears that went into the brick by brick building of T2F, that I must inform you, included, in the initial days, sandwiches and iced tea being made at their home to be served at the café. The eight year long journey really demanded that this be not abandoned no matter the magnitude of the tragedy they all faced.

It's been over two years, hundreds of stories, a bit of moving on, and T2F has continued. Today, people have diverse opinions about how T2F would have been had Sabeen been there. Whether it is what she had wanted it to be? And would she have done things differently. Who knows!

However, for a regular Karachiite, that looks at T2F as a dialogue and expression space, these questions and considerations are not important. Had T2F not decided to go on, the loss would have been bigger than Sabeen's loss.

The fact is that we Karachiites still have a place we can think of the first thing when a public meeting or a dialogue has to be organised. When friends are to be met with. When ideas have to be soundboarded. When issues have to be highlighted. It still stands for the promise of opportunities, of expression and exchange and that is what the essence of this idea is.

The difficult decisions on the part of those who decided to keep it open has an impact on people's faith in the future of ideas. And that is what perhaps makes it worth it.

By presenting these two examples, my point is not just about struggles and why is it important to go on. It is also about how we look at struggles and the question we ask about their outcomes. The outcomes are not necessarily the tangible structures we see. The outcomes could also be hidden in silent behavioral changes, quiet opening of unimaginable possibilities, accessibility to opportunities and opening of otherwise jammed doors. And perhaps this is what makes it worth it for those who participate and lead them. It all happened because they went on!