

Governance and Management Review

Vol. 2, No. 2, December 2017, pp. 71-46

Book Review

Shahid, A. (2010). *Silent Voices, Untold Stories: Women Domestic Workers in Pakistan and their Struggle for Empowerment*. Oxford University Press

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Introduction

The book under review titled *Silent Voices, Untold Stories: Women Domestic Workers in Pakistan and Their Struggle for Empowerment* written by Ayesha Shahid (2010) is an in-depth analysis of accounts of domestic female workers of Pakistani society in the context of their struggle for empowerment. For her, *Empowerment* is not just a terminology or an attribute but a socio-cultural and historically grounded construct. She interestingly relates the phraseology with the three concepts adjacently; *Silent Voices*- the living entity yet powerless and suppressed, *Untold Stories*- the long suffering yet made insignificant, and *Struggle for Empowerment*- the will to change. In this book, comprising of three parts and a conclusion, the author meticulously discerns the predicaments of laboring women and shares her insight about the issue by placing

the microcosm *Women Domestic Workers* into the *Pakistani* setting. The book offers some significant feministic overtones and opens up new dimensions of inquiry for ardent researchers.

The writer, a researcher at Law School in the University of Hull - the U.K, recounts her experiences with the domestic maids when she used to live in a house full of women domestic workers. This interaction provided her with the tool of empathy to listen and understand the intricacies of the strenuous lives of women domestic workers. She supplements her analytical insight with Islamic and feministic perspectives. The constant comparison strategy that relates the life accounts of the female victims to the ontological realities of existence alludes to the grounded theoretical framework. The field veracity takes over the mere assumptions and the speculative stances due to the field oriented investigations. In Pakistan, there is a dearth of investigations on female domestic workers; this field has been quiet ignored. The scarcity could be met by opting such meaningful inquiries and the evidence-based approaches. The gender empowerment exigencies, much needed in Pakistan, could be reflected and triggered through the socio-psychological and legal framework presented in such studies.

Methodology

The writer positioned herself philosophically into the interpretivist paradigm by adopting a constructivist approach. The epistemology has been knitted in the subjectivist's realities. Grounded theory technique supplemented by case studies was used to generate the empirical data. The in-depth inquiry of individuals and semi-structured groups, based on the interviewing technique, was conducted in the metropolitan Karachi, the culturally distinct tribal society of Peshawar and some other locations. The demographic variations were accounted for understanding the meaning of empowerment in diverse Pakistani context. Methodologically, the book also presents a cross cultural construction of meaning of empowerment. The writer, afterwards, also collects data from the countries of Northern and Southern hemispheres which assists in drawing analogies among domestic feminine workers of various nations; however the prevalent focus is upon the Pakistani female toilers. The predicament of the women and domestic workers has been captured through the primary content due to the scarcity of the authentic secondary academic works.

This book has rich details, glossary of cultural and domestic terms, data statistics and visual illustrations of the findings. This exploratory examination provides a profound cognizance into the nature, profile, living and working conditions of the laboring women in Pakistan. The

emic view is achieved through understanding the sufferers' perspective, thereby giving a 'voice' to the silent and voiceless, and listening to the unheard stories of the powerless.

Though, methodologically, the book offers ample insight of the plight of the female domestic workers in Pakistan yet it does not capture a holistic meaning of empowerment as, the author herself suggests conducting a vast-scale survey to document the details and characteristics of this labor class for viable and stable improvements. Though, this seems improbable; nevertheless, fruitful success in this regard can only be materialized when there is a collection of a massive database pertaining to the domestic toilers - as only then stringent measures, better programs and welfare projects can be devised, implemented and monitored.

Organization of Central Theme, Purpose and Argument of the Book

The book comprises of three parts, each consisting of chapters on specific issues. The first chapter (of part 1) focuses on various aspects like theoretical perspectives on women, empowerment and law. The second chapter eludes the illustrations of domestic services rendered around the global world. In second part of the book, separate space is allocated, in chapter 3, to the critiques on legal-constitutional frameworks and socio-cultural foundations. Chapter 4 carries a contextual analysis of the crucial matters in relevance to women and their work settings. The chapter 5 in part three of the book challenges the silence by relating and providing voice to the untold narratives of Pakistan's women domestic laborers and calls for the safeguard of this vulnerable class. Chapter 6 calls for an integrated approach including legal and non-legal strategies to safeguard women domestic workers in Pakistan. Overall the chapters of the book have been organized in a logical sequence and as per the objectives outlined in the preface.

This book provides a lens into the socio-cultural structure of Pakistan which reflects notion of patriarchy and sheer gender discrimination at all social tiers which is localizing the meanings of empowerment for female workers. The rationale of the book is built strongly around the logic that women prefer to work in domestic sector rather than other public spheres due to the secure environment of the household. Taking the other way round, the social mindset of keeping a housemaid - instead of a male-counterpart - exists due to the factor that women are considered safe in terms of household security. Ironically, such a trend reinforces the concept of gender inequality. The same reason is at work when the meager salaries and excessive workloads for the women are probed into.

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The book caters to the dilemma of a large service industry working in Pakistan. It discusses the dimensions of professional complexities, manifold treatments to various classes of society and multiple identities. The lived experiences of women domestic workers indicate the facts prevalent in a gendered society - and its relationships. The writer asserts that listening to the marginalized voices of suppressed female domestic workers would further help decrypt the unspoken fortune of female workers in these private spheres. It would also unearth the structural as well as interactional and functional intricacies, challenges, dividing factors of a domestic female worker. Understanding on the issue certainly will help breaking the glass shield and empower the powerless sections of Pakistani society. Moreover, women are compelled to opt for menial work under bonded labor, when they are entangled in the debt circle coiled up by the landlords in the rural quarters. Often the debts have to be paid with unfairly higher interest rates and sometimes the generations are pledged into the process. Rarely so - if the migration seems to offer the solution to the dismal situation in the rural setting; the move, in the quest for a better life in urban constituencies, results only in falling for domestic labor due to the limited skills of the female workers. The economic inequalities and subtleties of the charred life become obvious in the midst of the slogan of equal opportunities and equal pay for equal work - the masculine domestic worker on a different plinth... the feminine on a different platform probably with no base. The proverbial expression still gets echoed; all are equal- but some are more equal, all are human but some are more human in terms of respect, honor, emoluments etc.

The author states that additional work is to be done often beyond the designated and the expected obligations. Overtime at the workplace is just not expected but recurrently demanded by the authoritarian employers. The paradoxical implication soars high especially when the colossal amount of activity remains undervalued and frequently under-paid. The writer states that around the globe, the domestic labor is under-valued and considered as an underpaid service mandatory to be performed by the less empowered groups of society. The argument has a worldwide appeal that for poor women household chores remain the only principal option to serve the financial needs - to which Pakistan is not an exception. This class of society meets up with varying forms of harassment without remedies. There is a sheer discrimination in these rules for male and females in society. All this is experienced by the species happened to be women!!!

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The agonizing situation of the *have-nots* exposes the sham civilized behaviors of the *haves*. The open life of the domestic laborers tears apart the glittery privacies of the feudalistic society. The susceptibility of the service industry renders the unmerited fortification of the capitalist class hollow. The poverty plays havoc. The resourcelessness thwarts the attempts. The illiteracy deters the hope. The helpless silence reveals the injustices surrounding the common person. Still the passivity does not rule over them. They have to work in order to support their families. This appears to be an ongoing struggle for existence by resisting the oppressive forces.

The social distinctions are rampant with different social statuses for men and women. The factors of class, gender, ethnicity and race determine the work life all over the world including Pakistan. Nevertheless, the state and the society are impliedly questioned for its attitude towards the power imbalance. The legal repercussions for the Pakistan's domestic workers assume significance in the situation of compromised human rights. However, access to the formal legal system is hampered by the financial constraints and security hazards. There, at the same time, a legal void has been detected by the author in the area related to women harassment with reference to the domestic sector. The above multiple constructed realities call for abandoning positivistic legal centralism for its deficient resource to deal with the complicated issues.

The only road to sanity is by empowering women in their struggle to liberate themselves from the shackles of the exploitative working practices and treatments. The existence of the Pakistan's legal framework permits filing of petitions and civil suits to claim justice and damages in case of infringement of human and employment rights. Nonetheless, such tools remain unproductive in a society with disparate socio-economic strata and ambiguous conceptualizations of gender roles. The employers in these circumstances assume a capitalistic and feudalistic behavior whereas the labor class is heavily dependent, unaware and disorganized. This highlights the need to develop a legal framework that addresses the gap between the legal avowal and legal practicalities. The redefinition of workers that embraces the downtrodden female workers ought to be added in the legal code. Specialized type of procedures and services ought to regulate the domestic labor and thus facilitate the eradication of the evils like suppression and violence upon women.

According to the writer, the problem is multi-faceted which is not only associated to the legal issues but also has the contextual and socio-economic roots. Whatever the country of origin is,

the writer finds the insufficiency of even the well-developed legal systems due to the complex nature of the problem. Therefore, the legal undertakings have to be complemented by the non-legal strategies. This seems evidently- logical and rational. A complete revamp of the structural formations is required that can incorporate the domestic manpower in the mainstream. The recognition of such domestic laborers, their services and the productivity is indispensable to reinstate the identity and individuality of the sufferers.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The author concludes that... *something big* needs to be done. These voiceless contributors are an epitome of hard work, struggle and perseverance. They not only contribute towards the welfare of their family but also participate in the national economy and interests. The writer provides some examples through the cases of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh where women also increase the pool of foreign remittances. These constructive women prove themselves as a building block of the social fabric and national image.

This study also has underlying references for the lack of political will, though somewhat expressed in legal definition but largely unspecified in political actions. The current role of the labor unions seems to be inadequate and ineffective. The book sets a way forward. It also sets the stage for further activity and research by imploring to eliminate the injustices in human life and society. There is an implication of the role of civil society when Shahid (2010) mentions the need of workers organizing themselves and cooperating for the larger goal of improved life. The networking and activism shall generate mobility, awareness and problem resolution. This is also a wake-up invocation for the non-government organizations, labor unions and welfare communities to play their part. The media still has a long way to go to highlight the violation of human rights and assimilate political and public support. There is greater room for scholarly research in the areas of victimization, violence, harassment, under-employment and under-payment of working women in domestic and rural sectors. Education at the mass level can transform the traditional and conventional mindsets imbued with parochialism. Thus, this book has so many propositions for democratic governance, policy-makers, and the students of law, management and gender. The author- Shahid aptly suggests that in order to empower the working females formal laws in vogue could not work, non-legal interventions and strategies must be employed to achieve equality and equity in places women work. The book, as a whole,

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accentuates the same notion. Overall, the book is a must-read tome for novice as well as seasoned scholars.