Working Class Power & Feminism: An Interview with Alia Amirali

written by Alia Amirali | September 28, 2016



Writer and labor organizer, Sara Jaffri, and left-wing political worker and the Punjab Deputy General Secretary of the Awami Workers Party, Alia Amirali talk organizing, feminism and class in Pakistan.

Sara Jaffri (SJ): How did you get involved in political work, and with what sort of organizing have you been involved?

Alia Amirali (AA): I grew up with very politically conscious parents, and we often attended demonstrations and rallies. It was unusual to be brought up in that way in this society. When I got a bit older and started to come into my own, I got involved in organizing in the local anti-war effort in 2001 during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

I went abroad for college between 2002 and 2006, and returned to Pakistan in between during the climax of the Okara peasants' movement, which has again resurfaced recently. Later on I worked with the Katchi Abadi Alliance and People's Rights Movement, both collectives involved with people's struggles for land, livelihood, shelter, and so on. So these were the various avenues through which I moved beyond the activism that I participated in with my parents, and which allowed me to get involved with other movements, cities and struggles.

SJ: **You have been organizing with the Awami Workers Party for some time now. In your experience, to what extent can or has the AWP worked with an intersectional understanding of gender and class struggles?**

AA: What forms the actual day-to-day agenda of our organizing work is quite separate from intersectional theory that is almost mainstream in certain parts of the world, especially amongst activist and academic circles. Within the party, there isn't a homogenous understanding that class and gender and ethnicity are all linked. Building that understanding within the party is something we are doing as we go along– and we are also learning how to do it without facing a backlash. Because if you don't advance an analysis of class and gender strategically, you can actually end up having people against your agenda, which is much worse than not having them support it at all.

Although there are common values held by party members, in terms of the gender question there are

variations in the ways people conceive of its position in our larger political project. What has helped to bring feminism on the agenda is the fact that there are now many more women in the party than there were a few years back.

I feel that is the case in any organization and with any kind of oppression- the more people there are within the party who belong to marginalized groups, the stronger the struggle against that very marginalization becomes, both within and outside the party.

SJ: **Moving away from the discussion on the role of women in the Party, can you share your view on the role of women in various katchi abadis you have worked in?**

AA: Katchi abadis are not a monolith; different abadis have different dynamics and histories. Not all katchi abadis are equally vulnerable, either. For example those which are officially registered are better off and more secure than those that are considered 'illegal' and constantly face the threat of eviction.

When it comes to organizing women in particular, the difference in dynamics between the Muslim majority and Christian majority abadis is significant. In the Christian abadis, we see a lot more women coming out and participating, because the daily lives of these women involve more work outside of home. There are many more women [in the Christian community], who go out and work as maids, cleaners and cooks in rich peoples homes. The fact that they also earn and are much more mobile than a lot of Muslim women makes it easier for them to be motivated to join the movement in a public realm and to participate in mixed gatherings.

There are differences within Muslim communities as well, with Pashtuns historically being the most resistant to letting women participate in public affairs. But that is precisely the reason why we work in those places. We are not just service delivery people, and we don't and cannot afford to romanticize the people we work with. Politics is always about leading and following at the same time, and how to do both together. So for instance, at one of our May Day events which we held in one of the largest Pashtun abadis of Islamabad (which has since been razed to the ground), after a great deal of cajoling and insisting and arguing with the men of the abadi, we were able to set up a separate enclosure for women to enable them to participate in the event. It was not very many women, and they were all very shy and hesitant, but it was a first. It is only through little things like this that can we start to change the culture of public participation for women.

SJ: **You brought up struggling with men to enable women's participation. In what ways do you think men can be or have been allies to women in the movement?**

AA: That's a very complex question, because there are all types of men. Right now, a very small minority of men are allies. Most men are on the other side of the fence (i.e. hostile and/or dismissive), and there are some who have an opportunist approach but are not 'harmful' as such.

As women, there is no point in shouting blue in the face to men from the working class communities we work in, where the number of allies is close to nil. They basically have to be bludgeoned into engaging with the idea of women's participation and gender equity at this point; there is no pretense about that. So much for romanticising working class movements!

As women in the party, we push the work (of organizing on feminist lines) also through our male allies in the party, both because this (feminism, and the Party) is a collective project and also because as women, we are often socially disadvantaged in our relations with male leaders in working-class communities, and we need men in the Party to be able to promote the feminist agenda in our day-to-day politics. It's really lovely to see the few men in the party who see the need to do

this and who don't have to be forced to recognize its necessity by women. Though still few and far between, such men didn't exist in the Party at the outset (just as there were very few women then too), and their presence in the party brings a lot of relief to me.

SJ: **Can you speak about sexism within the left? Have their been such issues within the AWP and how have they been dealt with?**

AA: Yes there have been issues related to sexism within the AWP. It is hardly surprising that such issues have arisen within the party, given the deeply sexist and patriarchal society we come from. But the fact that these issues are emerging– as *issues*— and not just as 'occurrences' which happen and then ebb away but are actually flagged as a problem that needs to be addressed, dealt with, and punished– this is a new development for us and a positive one. However, what makes dealing with sexism within the Party more complicated than it is anyway (given the deeply personal nature of sexism-related issues) is the fact that we did not have mechanisms in place within the organization to know how to deal with such matters when they come up. The recognition – both of sexism as a problem, as well as the lack of (and hence, an acceptance of the need for) a mechanism to deal with these issues – has led to a process whereby these mechanisms are being created and put in place. There is still a long way to go in terms of having everyone in the party on the same page on sexism – but there is a difference between maintaining healthy differences within the party and seeing any kind of difference as a threat. Some of the differences in the party on how to deal with sexism (both within and outside the organization) are about strategy and method, while others are connected to larger differences about what feminism means, what Marxism means, or what it means to be a party or a party member. Needless to say, these debates are not light or frivolous ones. It was important for us to recognize that these debates do not require a 'resolution' in order to begin putting mechanisms in place that could tackle sexism within the party. The debates must continue, alongside the work, and I am glad that there was enough maturity within the party to make this happen.

As for sexism within the left in general- it is certainly there. I hope that other left organizations and movements too will accept the need and develop the capacity to fight it within their ranks. But at the same time, this should not turn into mud-slinging in which 'sexism' merely becomes an accusation flung by feminists onto the left, only to be met with 'liberal/bourgeois' being flung back onto feminists in response. This kind of exchange only leads to defensiveness and blindness on both sides, and erodes the possibilities for meaningful and productive exchange– an exchange which I believe is possible and necessary.

I also think that while it certainly is important to tackle sexism within the party and within the Left generally- and admittedly we are coming around to it very late –we should refrain from making this only about 'ourselves' to the point of becoming detached from the fight against sexism that is taking place around us in society, and that is in this respect 'external' to the party. I feel that we as a party get as much perspective on ourselves from internal self-criticism as we do from moving out into our deeply patriarchal society which we are a part of and engaging with people- those who are fighting sexism as well as with those who are not—thereby deepening our understanding of the problem(s) and enabling us to build movements to end exploitation—of women but not of women alone.

SJ: **In a public lecture at Habib University, you spoke of these very movements, as well as the lack of representation of the largest and most exploited section of labour-women. What do you see as some of the more significant barriers to working class women (i.e. those who have to work for wages, and often also do unpaid home work) self-organizing in Pakistan specifically?**

AA: I think in some respects, women and men both face similar difficulties in organizing because of social and workplace isolation and alienation.

But it so happens that women get the lowest paid jobs and often the most flexible and precarious ones as well, putting them at a further disadvantage than men, especially in the informal and agricultural sectors.

As far as organizing goes, the starting point to grapple with is the perception of women's participation in public life, and the idea that a woman is forced to be outside working exclusively because of economic hardship. The fundamental assumption is that she should really be in the home, so she if she has to go out, she should just work and come back. This is not at all the assumption on which men go out to seek work.

So the whole idea that women would organize to change something in the public sphere is less than straightforward. Women themselves *are* changing now, as we see with the lady health workers movement and many other examples. But many women themselves conceive of politics and organizing as work reserved for men. That's very much the signal that they get from within their homes too, as well as from the male-dominated public sphere. Their primary responsibility is still considered to be home making, even if they actually spend a great deal of time outside the home working.

Even with the changes that we are witnessing in this age, there is a class pattern at work. Somewhere in the lower middle class for instance, women workers—most notably lady health workers, teachers, and nurses– are organizing because they have to, but they are not the poorest of the poor either. So on the one hand women are much more visible in politics than they were a decade or so ago, but the stronger and more vocal women's organizing is still not happening in the most proletarian or destitute sections of the working class.

SJ: **Within the context that you describe, how far can the discussion on a woman's right to her body, her own sexual expression and reproductive rights go?**

AA: We live in a society in which just to talk about women is sort of an anomaly. Even in left wing discourse, discourses of resistance, or the more radical nationalist discourses, the discussion is either silent or downright patriarchal.

On the other hand, imperialism, multinational capital and non-governmental organizations have used feminism, or at least the slogan of it, to pave the way for their neoliberal imperialist agendas. This includes a discourse on reproductive rights, popularly packaged as 'family planning'.

Within the party, it's still a long shot to even conceive of mainstreaming the issue of sexuality. Reproductive rights is still a term that might be more palatable for men for instance, because the language of rights itself has this acceptability now. I am ambivalent about this though- I feel we could and should use the rights discourse strategically when it helps us to further an agenda that we think needs to be pushed, but at the same time we must be careful about not falling into politically problematic mainstream discourses, of which the rights discourse is certainly one.

What is certain though is that sexuality, sexual freedom, and autonomy are all areas which we cannot side-step, ignore, or wish away if we are working towards collective freedom and re-humanization of society and our selves. However, while recognizing the centrality of these issues to the attainment of freedom, it is equally important to be cognizant of the environment in which that struggle is unfolding, The last thing I would want would be to make that struggle even more difficult than it already is, or to lose or fragment the handful of people who have been united through years of hard work and organization-building. We must be patient and loving in our efforts to educate those— including those who are "comrades"– who don't see eye to eye with us on such fundamental matters. But while educating others, we must also remain open to being educated; to acknowledging

that we all carry our own blind spots, that we carry the oppressor within us too, and that an agenda for freedom cannot be thrust upon anyone or anything.

SJ: **What do you see as the level of progress on inclusion of those who do not identify with the hetero-normative man/woman gender binaries?**

AA: There has been an emergence of a more active queer politics in recent years, which is great. As a party, we have recently reached out to a group that a section of the local transgender community has made for themselves- obviously their agenda is pretty broad but part of what we want to support is that no sexual orientation or gender identity can be discarded. Every worker has a common cause and transgendered people in particular have a really hard time making a living.

In my experience, there has been a greater acknowledgement (historically) of the existence of diverse sexualities in smaller towns and village settings; on the other hand, some of the most gruesome and frequent instances of gender-based violence (particularly in recent times) have taken place in these very settings. I don't mean to romanticize rural life at all, but I do think that a lot of the patriarchal backlash that is being witnessed in the small towns and villages currently does not have very deep historical roots (which should not be confused with patriarchy itself, which has very deep historical roots). It seems to me to be a sharp and sudden response to a lot of other rapid changes in social conditions, coupled with women's growing refusal to simply accept their status as slaves. I find the cities are in certain respects more conservative than rural areas- the murder of transgender activist Alisha in Peshawar is just one recent example- and one will encounter a very real rejection of and disdain for queerness. But the flip-side is that it is the cities which have been the site for the emergence of transgender politics. In the cities, there are now organizations that openly claim a queer identity and do public actions (protests, campaigns, etc.), even though they are often met with a harsh patriarchal backlash. And then there is the possibility of finding individual freedom through anonymity which the cities provide- these are 'liberal' freedoms, yes, but ones that are criticized largely by those who take these freedoms for granted (and hence are already beneficiaries of the system), and ironically, criticize those who don't [have these freedoms] for claiming them…

SJ: **Speaking of liberalism, in a podcast interview with Christopher Lyndon, you raised the point that life was hell before the Taliban ever came about, and that mainstream liberalism claims that all our problems developed exclusively in the wake of religious militancy. How has patriarchy and feminist organizing been affected by the rise of this militancy?**

AA: There are two separate aspects to this. One is the growing impact of Taliban and its influence on women, which is very detrimental and violent. The other aspect is a whole 'discourse' which presents the Taliban as this barbaric disease that needs to be done away with by the secular rational liberal forces of reason. The fact that in this discourse the saviours are the United States and the military, and that the means are military operations, makes that political position (which is basically a liberal feminist position) extremely problematic and untenable.

Military operations have doubled and quadrupled and disrupted the lives of the very women whose name they are supposedly being launched in. This military kills indiscriminately, is answerable to no one, and is extremely patriarchal and masculinist in its very constitution as well as openly in its ideology.

So this is like the U.S. invading Afghanistan with the pretext of liberating Afghan women, which is a joke but also a cruel joke, which feeds off of really existing problems in those societies. The so-called solution is a very serious exacerbation of the problem.

In Pakistan, the war on terror has lead to an extreme polarization between the civil society/liberal crowd and those who are left-wing, and obviously between feminists on both sides. It has become a very charged environment and one in which it is very difficult for us to find common ground again, at least for the time being.

***SJ:* What is your response to the commonly held view proposed by imperialists and their allies that the oppression of women is inherent to Islam?**

AA: A lot can be said on this but to be brief: imperialists- who use people's oppression as a pretext to invade, ravage, extract and then dump- have no legitimacy in their claims to defend human rights or dignity. Imperialism has always needed an enemy, and now Islam (embedded in a larger civilizational discourse) has replaced Communism as that enemy. That does not mean, however, that we throw the baby out with the bathwater.

What I mean to say is that being opposed to imperialism does not mean automatically throwing away one's position on secularism. My own upbringing has been extremely secular (despite growing up in a religious society). This coupled with the blatant subjugation of women in the name of Islam we witness on a daily basis- whether within the realm of 'culture' or with direct reference to religious doctrine – has only cemented my secular position over the years. If someone were to make a strong and believable case for why and how Islam (as a doctrine) can be liberating for women, I would hear them out sure, but my own position is a sceptical one. The more interesting question to me is about why this conversation has begun in the first place and what the contours of this debate are in Pakistan.

The 'wearing-secularism-on-your-sleeve' kind of secularism seems to emanate from those haven't actually gotten out of their particular class environment and interacted with and organized women of the working or even middle classes, who- whether we like it or not- *do* identify with religion. A lack of engagement with religious beliefs of people is impossible when organizing. That would mean lack of engagement with the very people whose freedom we as leftists or others as secularists claim to be dedicated to. We in the party are not analysts or academics; we are political workers. For us on the ground, religion is an idiom that cannot be wished away; it comes up often and has to be dealt with – it's not something that can be so simplistically sidelined.

***SJ:* You mentioned the character of social attitudes held by those who haven't 'gotten out of their particular class environment'. What is your view then on acts of women reclaiming public space such as the Girls at Dhabas project?**

AA: I think it's a good initiative. There is no doubt about the fact that women, regardless of whether they are elite or non elite, need to struggle in a country like Pakistan where patriarchy is so entrenched and public space is so male dominated.

With initiatives such as these though, one has to be careful about not just being *jazbaati* and doing what you feel like in the name of your freedom. I mean that's valuable in and of itself, but politically it can also be quite damaging at times, and I am not sure whether they really care about that or think about that.

Social engagement requires political sensitivity or maturity or just even the sense that what you do impacts people other than yourself. I fear that something like Girls at Dhabas could be just a continuation of claiming more and more, of claiming what's 'mine' and within 'my' right.

In my view, it's not just a question of being able to express yourself and re-claim public space- which in this case is a claim coming from a class which already has more (collective and individual)

freedoms and privileges and claims than the vast majority of men and women in this society.

It is about being able to understand- or at least be willing to learn in the process of your struggle- that freedom is something that can only be really known through giving up of certain freedoms; through challenging the very 'self' that it is presently being glorified in the struggle.

The kind of relationship that we as a socialist feminist party could have with a group like Girls at Dhabas really depends on whether they are willing to engage with the fact that there are many issues other than the particular ones they are interested in. I don't really see any inclinations towards that kind of politics there, unfortunately, but we have not interacted with them too closely so I do not know how much potential there is (or not) to have a fruitful relationship.

However, if through this initiative, a larger number of elite women are willing and able to recognize and support acts of self expression and 're-claiming' when such acts emanate from the working class or other marginalized groups who have been invisibilized, and who need very much to re-claim a lot more than just public space, then I would have a much more sympathetic approach towards such initiatives.

SJ: **What gives you the inspiration and excitement to continue struggling?**

AA: Over the last decade we have grown in number, and in the last five to six years more women have joined. There has been an emboldening and strengthening of not just feminist politics within the party, but also what I consider to be very healthy culture of debate about what feminism is, about what Marxism is, about what liberation is. The ability to disagree and yet see nuances of various situations, and to consider disagreement neither as a problem to be done away with nor a mantra to exhaustingly emulate for the sake of difference, is something I feel can and does enrich us, and it is encouraging.

That kind of a culture is just slowly starting to emerge here. It's such a new plant or bud that it's not possible to say whether it's going to survive or not. Even if the party survives, this particular ethos is something that will have to be very carefully nurtured, and strangely enough militantly protected. But if there are more people who are interested in saving this, nurturing it, creating it, then I think that there is definitely a lot to look forward to.

Sara Jaffri *is a labour union worker and community news writer based in Toronto, Canada.*
Alia Amirali *is the Punjab Deputy General Secretary of the Awami Workers Party. She is also a lecturer in Gender Studies at the Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad.*

Originally posted here.