

ta'assur

impression/ effects of gender
equality and development



Conversations by Maria Hayat and Mashal Khan

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Maria Hayat

Mashal Khan

How to read it:

Change in font style shows the change voice and writer:

Maria Hayat – Serif Style

Mashal Khan – Sans Serif Style

Ta'assur is exchange of impressions on the topic of gender equality and development between Maria Hayat and Mashal Khan. It is an attempt to shed our armor, lean into our vulnerabilities and rumble with how to cultivate a culture of inclusivity and diverse perspectives. Punjab Skills Development Fund (PSDF) and Kaarvan Crafts Foundation are practicing integration and coming together by learning sharing each other's brave work, frameworks and social fields. For four to six months Maria from PSDF and Mashal from Kaarvan were completely open and transparent about their workflows and practices. This little publication is reflective writing on our personal values, beliefs and attitudes. It's about seeing the world with lens of curiosity as well as letting the world see into us.

This publication is about showing up and sharing our reflections with you so that you can look inward and see what gifts, skills, power and privilege do you possess – how might you like to give a gift to society to create more just and equal living?



*'Before we solve a problem, we need to define it.
A well-defined problem often contains its own
solution within it'*

I wonder if everyone sees the world through a gendered lens. Yet even language is engendered. In English the pronouns change with gender or with the collective, he, she, they; whereas in languages like Urdu even the verbs change, karta hai, karti hai, kartay hain, and French even engender how countries are referred to, Le Mexique, La Belgique...

The largest theological accounts of the beginning of the human race embodies this dichotomy, Adam and Eve. Anthropology speaks of the early-on division of labor-hunters and gatherers. Did notions of gender pre-exist even the most basic societal structures? Gender is defined as either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. So while sex and biological differences existed, what ascribed meaning to each was culture and society.



Can social and cultural differences alone account for inequality? Difference and classification enable us to form an understanding of the world, to form commonly agreed upon terms and definitions that provide the basics of language, even of identity. Perhaps the instant that inequality is created is with the introduction of power. Power by its nature, seeks to concentrate power in the hands of some, a status quo is formed, and meaning are ascribed and social norms are created to maintain power within the status quo.

Maybe we do not all see (observe) inequality and gendered structures in our everyday world. Perhaps unless we are victims of oppressive inequalities or norms, or unless we challenge them, they remain largely invisible. Possibly we see them, but do not yet possess the vocabulary to describe or communicate it.



I personally belonged to the latter group. Why men wouldn't contribute to housework, why girls were expected to serve the men, or why girls couldn't go outside the same way as boys are questions that bothered me long before I knew the terms 'patriarchy' or 'misogyny'. Thanks to a course I took during my Bachelors degree, aptly called 'Gender and Power', I now possessed the vocabulary to understand, and communicate it.



The ability to name and to define is essential to understanding any 'social construct' and its effects on our unconscious values, behaviors and attitudes. The terms gender, culture and power are interconnected and big concepts. Let's unpack this notion of power further – is it a default attribute of birth? To be born boy or girl; to be born rich or poor; to be born Muslim, Christian, Hindu or Buddhist; to be born white, brown or black. All these aspects are a gift of fate and outside of any individual's control but certainly do give some people more leverage or 'power' and 'privilege' to more opportunities, to more rights than other groups? The question to ask is simple "why?" It's the 21st century, why do we let old school thinking of patriarchy colonize our minds for generations? Why do girls having the right to equal education, equal participation, equal say in how she wants to lead her life is so challenging in Pakistan?

I am extremely fortunate and grateful to be born in a family that is loving, supportive and open to change. Truth be told. Growing up I hated studying. I disliked going to school – to an institution that made learning boring and even scary at times. I had an encounter with a sadistic tutor in my childhood that made me run from education at first. It wasn't till I moved to the USA and was in 5th grade that I saw change in the education curriculum from rote memorization to cultivating critical thinking. That is beside the point, I unlike many Pakistani girls always had the luxury of having an education even though at first, I was not very appreciative of this. Especially Pakistani girls living in rural villages have their right to education taken away from the elders in their family. This thinking that girls are meant to be homemakers and caretakers gets in the way. That boys are supposed to be the bread-earners, the providers, the protectors and therefore much more endowed to education and life opportunities. Till when will we keep letting this dogmatic thinking continue? In what ways may we begin to shift Pakistani society's thought and reclaim our imaginations?

This change you speak of Mashal, the shifting in thinking, I find it to be both a dear hope and an elusive goal. Have there been any outstanding moments when you have been out in the field and interacting with rural women on ground, or online, and felt that the shift in thought is slowly but gradually happening?

Linking it back to development, I wonder what a gendered lens towards development ought to look like and what it would achieve. Through countless studies, whether through the Gates Foundation, at the World Bank or the World Economic Forum, there is a growing understanding (along with resistance) that women need to be placed at the center of development for change to enact. Particularly in a post-COVID world, the understanding is that we need to develop a gendered approach to truly be able to 'build back better'.



In my opinion an effective approach to development with women at the center needs to take on both approaches to have a sustainable impact. If we build schools to educate girls, yet their families still underestimate the importance of girl's education, or we increase women skills for jobs, yet work environments are hostile to women, any intervention will at best have short term impact, and at worst will be built to fail.



My view is that a gendered approach to development, particularly in the context of Pakistan, needs to be two-fold. One facet needs to look at economic empowerment, whether through education, skills training, supporting small businesses etc. The other needs to look at social and behavioral change, cultivating critical thinking in women, empowering them to re-evaluate misogynistic structures and values, coaching men to see the need and to support equal rights for women.



On the other hand, a holistic localized approach to gender and development in Pakistan, will take into account the larger structural and societal roadblocks, and instead of ignoring they exist, and factor that into the solution.

I have observed this sort of holistic approach at Kaarvan, where providing female artisans with the relevant skill-set is only one part of the entire change planned and enacted. Alongside technical skills the focus on life-skills and technological skills, as well as on developing gender sensitivity, and building a culture of care make this a refreshing and well-rounded approach to development.





Social Change requires transformation both at personal individual level as well as community level. I perceive this as a spiral of care that circles out of self to caring for community. Like you said it is two-fold of economic-empowerment as well as awaking the individual critical consciousness. In my three years of ethnographic field with rural artisans this shift or change in more gender equality mindset takes place over a course of year more or less. It has to start with addressing their basic economic needs. By focusing on economic empowerment of women the organization gains trust of male gatekeepers as attention to crafting a viable pathway around skills and access to industry markets mobilizes the community towards a vision of dignified livelihoods. Once you have developed a trusting relationship with the community around skills and market linkages then we can dive deeper and workshop together challenges of poverty, inequality, education, waste and public space in their immediate environment through interactive activities.

I contain so many stories of these rural women in me. Stories spanning from pain, struggle and joy. I would say the phrase “wholehearted living” is representative of these women. I have observed growth and change in the women as well as in some of the men. I do not wish to disclose the names here and protect their anonymity – during safeguarding workshop in 2019 a number of artisans disclosed how initially their husband used to raise their hands but these women having found confidence in themselves through their craft skills – faced with ill treatment again posed their spouse with question “ek thappad ya aamdani? (one slap or income).” This questioning remark halted further mistreatment and led to the cultivation of “equal responsibility” of running the household. Another story is of a one-armed aged father who cycled his teenage daughter every single day to the Wania Wala, Gujranwala Center so that “my daughter can learn skills and be independent in this world even when I’m no longer here.” Social change requires sweet labor. It begins with personal awareness of the role in social stratosphere to relational bridging of community to addressing the structural root causes that give rise to violent conflict to cultivating a more gender just culture.

What I have
a hard time
rumbling with
is this culture
of comparison
and judgement
in Pakistan.
The ever-
looming ghost
of “log kya
kahenge.” In
what ways
can we
cultivate more
authenticity
and let go of
what people
think?



That story you mentioned about the one-armed father taking his daughter to the center to learn skills really stuck with me, and is a reminder that we cannot paint with broad brush-strokes, While there are patterns of oppression and violence, there are allies and support that exist as well.

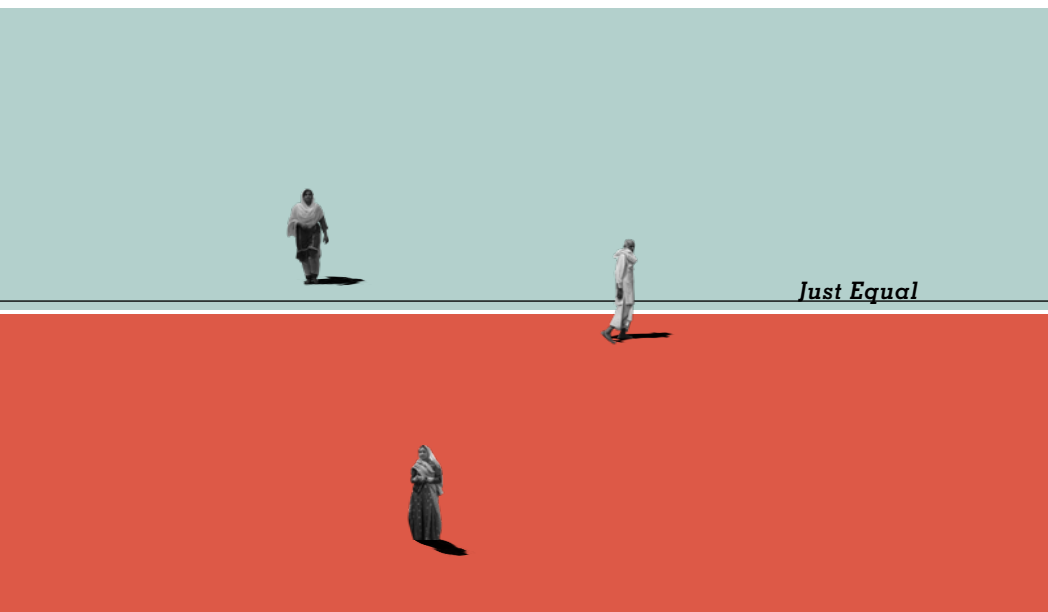
With regards to the two facets of development needed, financial independence and societal change, I realize through the examples that the two become linked as well, women can yield more decision-making power when they contribute income to the household, and in a myriad ways affect social change even if on an individual, micro level.





We need to reclaim and redefine family, friendship and community. In Pakistan, often marriage is seen as a financial safety net as well as companionship – means to secure a future of stability and reduce the chances of loneliness. I wonder if in this rush of security families might unintentionally be causing more harm than securing a safe haven. I have heard so many lived experiences of both artisans and friends where families arrange a marriage thinking the man is decent and holds a respectable job thereby their daughter is going to live a joyful life. In matters of months, it turns out the rush to get married led to insufficient background check that the man is not quite as decent as it first appeared – the stories vary from man being dishonest to having a second wife; not giving respect; home disputes becoming violent... Let us for a moment engage in thought an experiment. If what we seek is companionship – does it have to be in form of a mate? Perhaps companionship needs to be viewed in terms of community – a group of individuals we feel share our views, accept us for both our strengths and weaknesses.

We are part of society and often see our choices through internalized cultural norms – “when are you getting married? When are you going to have kids? What will people say?” Then this whole concept “parda (veil)” adds a level of complexity of mindset and spirituality that is hard to define and even more difficult to comprehend. Concept of parda is a family’s love and protection. Perhaps at times can be overbearing as well. This space rife with misconstrued truths. What is truth but a lived experience based on individual values and perception of reality. That perception of reality varies from one individual to the next. Right or wrong – put aside. Let’s focus on building role-models of what happiness, purpose and connection look like outside the patriarchal world view. Outside the scripted life list awaits a community that we can cultivate and belong to. Here at Kaarvan these women artisans are my sisters and friends. Through workshops, field visits and trainings – Kaarvan has become a safe space where we can share our lived experience, to be open, vulnerable and curious – together reimagine our homes, our work and our souls. Rising strong together requires being reflexive and letting go of regressive constructs of savior mentality.



The question that arises then is, how do we re-imagine a world that is more balanced and equitable for all? I personally believe the answer lies somewhere in the realm of self-determination – the right of women to be able to decide their own direction, their own future. To have a platform, as well as the tools and knowledge to be able to raise their own voice, to speak for themselves. That, to me, ought to be the aim of ‘Gender Equality and Development’.

Each of us needs to play a part in re-imagining and ensuring a more gender equitable future. As women, or as male allies, we need to introspect and see whether we are challenging or perpetuating the current inequalities. Ask ourselves whether and how we benefit from gendered privilege. Come face to face with our own biases, unlearn and relearn and adjust our world views. Think deeply on how we can be part of the change, can we be active advocates, can we try and have hard, uncomfortable but vital and necessary conversations on the need for change.



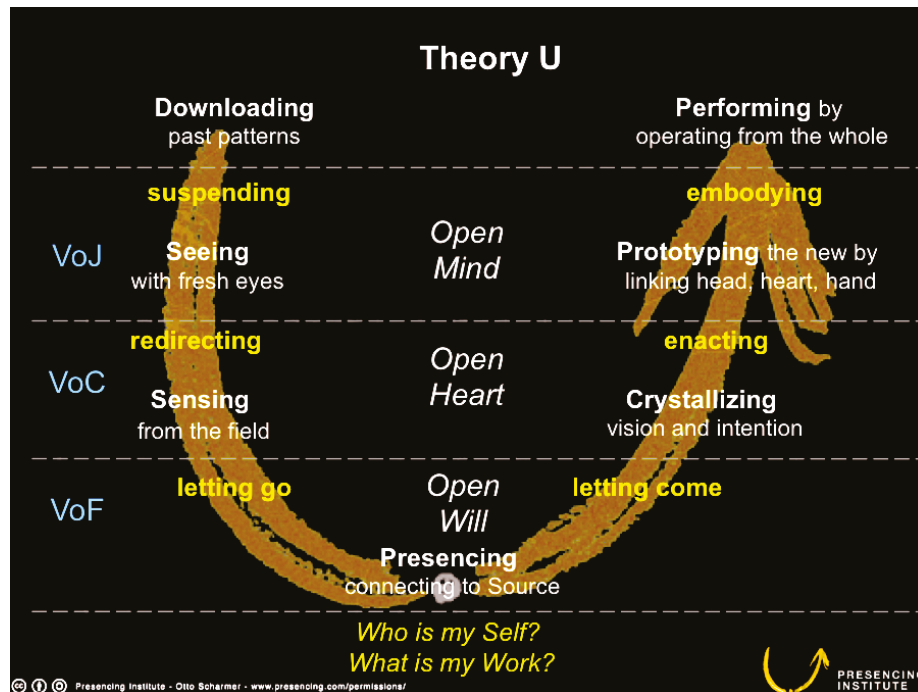
*And if you haven't done so yet,
maybe right now is the perfect time
to think and reflect on:*

● What is your gendered experience
of living in this world?

Do you think belonging to either
gender (or whichever part of
the spectrum) gives you certain
advantages over the other, in the
society that you live in?

Do you think the current system,
the balance of power or decision-
making in your country, society,
home, just and equitable?

Is there room for change to make
decision-making more inclusive
and equitable?



Yes, tapping into our collective capacities requires self-reflection and action. Maria you posed some thoughtful questions for us to consider. I would also like to share MIT's change management method "Theory U" developed by Otto Scharmer. The arch of U is something we all go through. It is when we are very bottom – lost, confused, scared – when we rumble with inner knowing and begin to open mind, heart and will. What I like about Theory U is that it makes visible the invisible processes. By seeing the world through curiosity "open mind," sensing the field with "open heart" and the most difficult bit "open will" letting go old and letting come future that is fused with vision and intention.

As you think about your own path to daring leadership, community and development remember Brené Brown wisdom: "Choose courage over comfort. Choose whole hearts over armor. And choose the great adventure of being brave and afraid. At the exact same time."



Kaarvan Crafts Foundation
Crafting Livelihoods

