



Dissecting the double standard

BY FARIS ISLAM ON JULY 28TH, 2011 | COMMENTS (86)



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After five tumultuous months, which included the aftermath of the bin Laden raid and a few rounds of Indo-Pak diplomacy, last week **Hina Rabbani Khar was sworn-in** as Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs. To many, Khar seemed an obvious choice, serving as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs without a Foreign Minister for the last five months and previously serving as Minister of State for Economic Affairs under both the Musharraf and Zardari governments. While hardly surprising, Khar's appointment was historic as she became Pakistan's first female Foreign Minister and currently, the **youngest serving Foreign Minister in the world**. Suffice to say, the reaction to Khar's appointment, both at home and abroad have been mixed, with some hailing the new FM as an example for

Pakistani women everywhere and others decrying Ms. Khar as 'just another feudal'.

Whether a savior or the status quo, Khar has been followed by a monsoon of commentary following her every move – from her running of Polo Lounge in Lahore to her outfits and accessories, there is little about her that has failed to feed the media hype. As she crossed the Eastern border, the media's fascination with her appeared to have snuck aboard her PAF jet, as newspapers across India analyzed her fashion and style, with one outlet calling her "a perfect combination of **beauty and brains**" (luckily for her, her style's been judged much better than the **infamous Clinton pantsuits** of another nation's top-diplomat). Interestingly, I've struggled to find anything focusing on the style rather than the statements of Shah Mehmood Qureshi or Khurshid M. Kasuri or any of our previous (male) Foreign Ministers.

While the double-standard between male and female politicians worldwide is hardly new, the debate over whether Khar's appointment is a victory for Pakistan's women appears to be. In a recent article for *Foreign Policy*, **Huma Iltiaz argues** that appointing our first female Foreign Minister is hardly a cause for celebration, dismissing her electoral victory in the NA-177 seat as based "of her last name and feudal lineage" and arguing that "women MPs being elevated to positions of power has rarely translated into real action or change for the women of Pakistan." Not having studied the electoral politics of the Muzaffargarh II seat in-depth, I would be amiss to comment on the role her last name may have played in her victory – or indeed if it played a different role than that of any Pakistani politician from a landholding background. Indeed, whether or not dynastic politics played a role in Ms. Khar's election may have more to do with the nature of politics and elections in Pakistan rather than women's empowerment.

With regards to women's empowerment however, perhaps the simple act of having our country represented by a woman at global forums and playing a highly visible role can do more than imagined. A paper by Esther Duflo, an MIT Economics Professor and one of the founders of the highly renowned Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and others explores this issue. **The paper** acknowledges that "exposure to women leader's does not alter villagers' taste preference for male leaders. However, it weakens stereotypes about gender roles in the public and domestic spheres and eliminates the negative bias in how female leaders' effectiveness is perceived." Providing visible female role models in Pakistan can thus yield enormous benefits not only by inspiring the next generation of Pakistani women but also by dispelling stereotyped gender roles.

This is crucial to tackle another aspect of the double standard for male and female legislators – getting different marks for the same results. Studying the effectiveness of village councils in rural India after a quota for women's participation was introduced, **other research by Duflo and Petia Topalova** found that "villages reserved for women leaders have more public goods" at a comparable quality, yet "residents of villages headed by women are less satisfied with the public goods". Thus even when provided with more services at comparable quality, the villagers were less happy with the service than those in other villages led by men.

Pakistan has been making progress towards increasing female participation, and currently ranks 46th in the world with **22.2 per cent** of the seats in the National Assembly and Senate filled by women. However, given that 17 per cent of the Senate and 18 per cent of the National Assembly is reserved for women, the 22.2 per cent of representatives quickly shrinks to between four and five per cent of elected representatives. Given the dearth of highly-visible, elected female politicians that can contribute to the national discourse and shape policies and priorities, perhaps when photos of Hina Rabbani Khar's return from India are splashed across the nation's media, we should focus on the peace process – and not her purse.



Faris Islam studied Political Science and History at Tufts University. He is based in Karachi, where he works in the development sector.

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86 Responses to " Dissecting the double standard "

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Kamath says:

August 2, 2011 (2 weeks ago) at 10:42 pm

Insightful despite few flaws.



Azhar N. says:

August 2, 2011 (2 weeks ago) at 9:57 pm

She belongs to landed 'elites', that is all you need to become a minister in this government of 'elites'. Why even question her credentials ? The top elite in President House is there without any credentials except that he is dynastic leader.



Syed Mohammad Ali Shah says:

July 31, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 6:02 pm

I don't think making a women our foreign minister will make any difference to womenfolk in Pakistan. If we think freedom is, being in control of your destiny then most men are even not free, let alone women. I lived in West and had very good women friends, and I tell you what most women in Pakistan are more free than their western counter parts. In Pakistan women only do house chores, and in west they work for 8 hours which in reality is 12 hours if we count preparations, journey etc then they do the house chores on top of that like Pakistani women, I can go on and on but I don't think that will make any difference.



Muhammad Farooq says:

August 1, 2011 (2 weeks ago) at 7:15 pm

Syed I think you are mixing freedom of women with free (leisure) time of women with your above example. Here we are discussing emancipation of women in terms of personal choices and decision making. What decision making power an average woman in Pakistan (with all the free time at her disposal) enjoys vis - a - vis a woman in the West, By the way I have been living in the West for over a decade now.

Everything has to have a beginning, it is better to have a women FM then having no woman FM. It will not bring a revolution but it will be a very small very very small part towards that end. All the best and blissful, blessed Ramadan.



Hassan says:

July 31, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 11:17 am

I think the current foreign Minister of Pakistan is a very good fit for the position, Pakistan needs to show that we mostly give a high place to a woman in society and she can get ahead in all fields. Having a charming FM will certainly be good for Pakistan in one way or another.



Kamal Malik says:

July 31, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 2:33 am

I Fully agree with Faris Islam...



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Pervaiz Arab says:

July 30, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 11:40 pm



Of Course she is Good looking, graceful and above all very sharp and intelligent. What else we require from a young Minister, who is doing her best with confidence, it must be appreciated that so far she has done well and we may see better results comparing with the past Foriegn Ministers. God Bless her. Gender should not be discriminated for at least learned people.

kamran khan says:

July 30, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 10:01 pm



i think shah mahmud qureshi was much best option than this lady in ths time.

Syed says:

July 30, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 1:53 pm



The outcry is not whether Ms Khar is a female, although it adds a lot of spice, but the fact that we have government of toadies, where political dynasties, feudal vote-banks, inherited ministries and privileges and owed favors can land a 34 years a position of FM, when the country is going through its toughest time in its history. At stake is the survival of this nation and its people, and although Ms Khar can be a class act on any ramp, the Pakistan Foreign Ministry should be the last place she should be allowed to strut her wears. Her dynastic ambitions and a president who never forgets his supporters, as we have night club managers and hospital administrator managing our country's energy policy, has allowed her to choose the portfolio which allows her to fulfill her craving for being a celebrity. But I guess this is the swan song for our country and we might well let a swan do the job of taking us to our sunset. We are doomed and this is just more pilf to help us along the way.

Ashar Hameed says:

August 1, 2011 (2 weeks ago) at 11:54 am



Well said Syed. If our fellow countrymen still cannot comprehend the situation of the country and if they still cannot distinguish between ground realities of 2006/07 and 2010/11 then I guess we deserve our president, prime minister, foreign minister, interior minister and so on.

Ram Krishan Sharma says:

July 30, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 3:57 am



Zaid wrote " May Allah help and protect our country and other Muslim nations." What about India and other non muslim countries ? They need Allah's protection as well.

R S JOHAR says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 10:09 pm



The article does not do justice to her flawless performance in India.

Saad says:

July 31, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 7:10 am



Yes may Allah protect all human kind. Thanks for pointing that out Mr. Sharma.

teluka65 says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 4:56 pm



Maybe it is time to let the younger generation on both sides of the border sit and discuss your problems.They have no previous "baggage" to carry.Times change it is time you both countries did to.It is time for sane people to talk to one another.Parties with vested interests like your army and racist politicians on both sides should realize the futility of their acts.Your demand for Kashmir will remain just that.Let these new generation work things out.It is time that the people have some peace.The question is ,will those with vested interests graciously give way?

Muhammad Farooq says:

July 30, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 8:19 am



Nice thoughts. In reply to your question:The question is ,will those with vested interests graciously give way? My answer is No. On both sides of the borders there are vested interested they would cling to their old positions. Good thing is that at least ice is breaking; let's hope for the best!

shahid says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 4:17 pm



People do get floored by the way a person looks, attires and delivers the dialogues.
That is what a popular actor/ actress does.
In international politics one must have depth and breadth.
Ms Khar is an accomplished person as far as her training and buisness success is concerned
Hope she is considered a good and successful diplomat at the end of her present assignment.

Hindu Kush says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 4:10 pm

There is much difference between Urdu and Hindi!



Iftikhar Husain says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 4:00 pm

Female foriegn minister may make a difference in the male dominated foriegn politics.



a says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 2:29 pm

keep writing Faris! you make a lot of sense!



kalyan says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 2:21 pm

Although there are few things to be liked about your country expect Wasim Akram and Nadeem F Paracha, I have no doubts Pakistani's are mostly very good looking people...



Hindu Kush says:

July 29, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 3:54 pm

The same feelings are most of Pakistanis have about India!



Mastishhk says:

July 31, 2011 (3 weeks ago) at 2:39 am

For example..Mudassar Nazar and Anwar Saeed !!!



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