Gender Disparities in South Asia: Re-examining Ideologies to Develop Healthy Dialogue

Introduction

Society’s standards for sexuality are often different depending on race, class, and gender. In many Indian, Pakistani, and Middle Eastern communities in South Asia as well as communities of South Asian descent in the Britain and America, the sexual standards for men tend to stand in stark contrast to the sexual standards for women. These standards are not only oppressive to women but they are also unattainable. We frequently find that if men strive to attain the standards set for them, women cannot fulfill their prescribed roles. Because of these ironical expectations, women find themselves the victims of physical and sexual violence when they fail to live up to their socially imposed roles. It is impossible for women to meet these standards because they are caught in a series of impossible expectations. Women will continue to be caught in these standards so long as a patriarchal ideology persists in certain communities in South Asia and popular culture and the media continue to encourage these patriarchal notions. Consequently, women often do not fight these standards because they accept them as “traditions” or “normal.” State legislation alone against these oppressive traditions proves sometimes to be counter productive towards women’s liberation as opposed to helpful: in order for women to escape this cycle and have some agency, we must first deconstruct this patriarchal ideology and create some healthy discourse.

Creating and Re-Creating “Masculinities:” The media as powerful voice

This tradition of “patriarchies” and hyper-masculinities does not appear out of nowhere. It is created and re-created in popular media and discourse and in turn, becomes
popular ideology. There are a few mediums through which this patriarchal ideology is
translated in the media to the masses in South Asia as well as well as well as South Asian
populations in Britain and America. The main medium through which South Asian culture
is translated to different audiences world wide is through the Bombay based Hindi-English
film industry called “Bollywood.” Since many Indian and non-Indian audiences world wide
watch Bollywood films (Hollywood produces 500 films per year on average and has a
worldwide audience of 2.6 billion whereas Bollywood produces more than 1000 films
every year and has a worldwide audience of 3 Billion) it is important to look at the types of
messages it is portraying (Nita). The concept of “cenephillia” refers to the idea that film-
makers and audiences both share complicity in that filmmakers can “read” our desires just
as much as we, as an audience, can consciously “read” the film-maker’s creations (Rajan).
Film-makes often gauge the type of “masculinities” they will portray in their films
depending on what their audiences expect to see. More often than not, in attempting to
keep up with the social norms surrounding patriarchies, women often lack agency in many
Bollwood films.

For instance, Lagaan is a Bollywood film about a small town in India coming
together to resist taxation by British imperialists. They challenge the British men in their
town to a match of cricket to decide whether or not they would have to pay taxes that year.
Though the main character, Bhuvan, eventually falls in love with Gauri, a simple, timid girl
from his town, there is much tension between her and Elizabeth, the sister of a
commanding British officer and main antagonist of the film. Elizabeth is portrayed as the
compassionate English woman who shows Bhuvan and his friends the proper way to play
cricket and win against the British team. She is tall, lean, and comes to practices dressed in
long skirts and fancy hats. In contrast, Gauri’s main roles are bringing Bhuvan and his team-mates food, fashioning their protective gear, and tending to their injuries. She plays no part in the actual cricket game itself and is constantly jealous of Elizabeth’s relationship with Bhuvan. Though this film was nominated for an (American) Academy award for “Best Foreign Language Film” because of its unique story line and concept, it is interesting to note that the British woman in this movie actively practices agency by rebelling against her selfish, power hungry, brother’s wishes and poses as the caring woman who shows the “poor Indians” how to properly play the sport. Gauri does not practice this same agency and acts within her gender normative roles of providing food and caring for the injured from the sidelines (Lagaan).

This trend is present even in films made in America with Indian characters in leading roles. For example, many non-Indian and Indian people alike have seen or at least heard of the film Monsoon Wedding. In this movie, Aditi, the daughter, is so unhappy with her “arranged” marriage that she runs off late at night to meet her TV producer lover. Meanwhile, Aditi’s mother sneaks away to the bathroom to smoke during this wedding madness without her husband knowing. Though this film does not necessarily show women abiding to traditional norms and sacrificing their lives for men, it shows them rejecting rigid norms such as “arranged marriage” and being a shy, obedient wife in an unhealthy way. This movie is problematic because it shows that women’s solutions to harsh traditions are to respond by being promiscuous (Monsoon Wedding).

In addition to films, it is common for magazines to advertise women in their “domestic” roles since these seem to be appealing to the public. For example, some people
thought it was “cute” to put a picture in the English daily of the future mayor of Bombay cooking in her kitchen. It seems that the media thinks it will be easy for the public to relate to a woman with a non-traditional (political) role if they can still identify with her traditional domestic roles. She seems more appealing and feminine this way (Nita). The media does not present male politicians in this same way. We do not see pictures of male politicians changing a light bulb or fixing an appliance in the house. For some reason, a male’s political position can stand alone to prove his masculinity. But why can a political position not say the same thing about a woman? Why must she prove herself as a woman by abiding to her socially prescribed roles?

In another television show, *Crime Time*, a woman in a lead role, Pratima Sharma, is shown combing her child’s hair and telling the audience how much she loves to cook at the beginning of an episode. In the next scene, the husband complains how much his wife’s job as a police officer is hurting the family. “Though the media purports to project the modern, liberated woman, it is actually endorsing women as consumers,” says Professor Malini Bhattacharya.” This is derogatory to the image of women and is only remotely linked with their real concerns” (Nita).

A study conducted by the Delhi based Media Advocacy group brought to attention several instances of stereotyping and of discrimination in the media. For example, the study says that interviews of men in the newspapers rarely talk about their marital status or their dress sense. The main focus of these interviews is their work. In contrast, the focus on women is their appearance and their families. For instance, when banker Tarjani Vakil was interviewed, the press chose to focus on her beautiful “sari,” her decision to remain single,
and her living arrangements with her extended family. Additionally, her feminine qualities like her soft voice were emphasized and the article pointed out that she was “no power lady” (Nita).

Additionally, the amount of coverage women get in the media is much less than men do. This study shows that men are provided with a larger amount of opportunities to show their viewpoints in the media than women are. Also, men are represented in more diverse professional roles: administration, law, business, science and technology. Women’s representations in some of these professions are negligible and sometimes excluded in totality depending on whether or not the profession is acceptable. Even if women are shown to be successful in “male” professions, media articles put an emphasis on pointing out their “femininity.” For instance, in a television interview, a senior police officer named Kiran Bedi was asked if she liked to cook. “We have been living with this stereotyped representation of women for years,” says Father Rosario, the executive Director of the Chitrabani film Institute. “The media does try to establish a woman’s femininity, especially if she is a successful woman” (Nita).

Even Kiran Desai, the winner of the Booker prize this year for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* was questioned as to why she was not married and did not have any children. She replied that writing a novel took her to a ‘lonely dark place’ and I would not have been able to give my child what he/she needed…but I wonder if a man would have been asked this question? I mean, here is a woman who is obviously not married and she must have good reason for it… why embarrass her about it?”
Beyond just showing that South Asian women can have a positive image, I believe the media is an important medium through which we can convey the idea that Indian women *can* have agency, or the capacity to make their own choices. I do not wish to argue that the media should distort reality and *pretend* that women are “equals” but rather emphasize the ways in which it is possible for women to practice their agency in their personal and public realms.

**Masculinities in Practice: A question of honor**

Upholding these patriarchal traditions the media and popular culture feed society and maintaining a family’s “honor” seem to come hand in hand. In some South Asian communities, particularly those of Muslim faith in the Middle East and Pakistan, a family’s honor is often dictated by the chastity of the family’s women (Sahai, Niaz). If a woman’s chastity comes into question, these women can be subject to brutal violence or even death (Niaz). However, the hyper-masculine image that males are supposed to uphold raises the question: If these women are to remain chaste, and these (heterosexual), hyper-masculine males are supposed to be having sex, who are these men having sex with (Niaz)? Since men are commonly the undisputed rulers of the household and activities within the home are seen as private, violence in the home is common. Along with traditional forms of violence such as wife battering and sexual assault, women are also exposed to dowry crimes such as bride burning, kidnapping for the purpose of prostitution, and “honor killings” (Niaz). However, husbands’ domination over wives, including use of violence, has been sanctioned by cultural beliefs rather than just personal beliefs. In 1997, statistics published by the World Health Organization revealed that out of 24 countries over four continents, between 20 and 50 percent of the women interviewed reported that they
suffered physical abuse from their male partners. This is because in many of these South Asian communities, rigid cultures and patriarchal traditions which devalue the role of women still persist (Niaz)

In both India and Pakistan, many women are still treated as second class citizens and wives are often battered for misconduct and even minor mistakes. Data about reported “rape cases” showed that there was an upward tendency in this form of violence against women. Although we are now in the 21st century, the traditional modes of violence against women have continued to grow (Niaz). Women are still seen as property and disallowed a choice in marriage. Families still go to extremes to prevent women from violating traditions. Honor killings are carried out by men who believe their wives, daughters, or sisters have violated norms regarding appropriate behavior for women. This damages a man’s honor. In fact, according to a report by Amnesty International, several hundred women die each year from “honor killings” in Pakistan. Many of these victims come from a city as booming and populated as Lahore. Hundreds of women are also killed in the name of honor in tribal villages, but these killings go unreported mostly because society fails to condemn such actions and refuses to inform the police (Niaz). Some women feel so suppressed that, instead of fighting for their rights, they commit suicide since it seems to be the only way out. Suicide rates have continued to escalate since 1989. In a couple cases, women not only killed themselves, but also their small children because they saw the deprivation their children had to endure because of economic hardship (Niaz). Often women are killed at even the slightest question in their sexualities.

For example, in many Arab cultures across the Middle East and Pakistan, a woman’s hymen is supposed to remain in tact till her marriage night (Namaan). On that
night, when she and her husband engage in sexual intercourse, a bloody spot on her bed sheet is a sign of honor and her father parades around her community holding it up with pride. However, many women have ruptured hymens for reasons other than having had intercourse and hence they do not rupture upon intercourse on their wedding nights even if they are in fact virgins. These women are also subject to honor killings (Human Rights Watch). In fact, in Turkey, by orders of police reports, doctors perform physical exams on women to confirm ruptured hymens. When they find signs of breaks in hymens, they label the woman being examined as “not a virgin” without actually knowing the reason why the woman’s hymen was ruptured (Human Rights Watch).

**Normal People Don’t Bleed**

The primary role of many South Asian women is seen as to bear children and support a healthy family (Niaz). However, concepts such as menstruation are still left under the table. It is “unnatural” to be a bleeding person: normal, healthy human beings do not have blood dripping from them constantly. Some interpretations of certain passages in the Koran depict menstruating women as “polluting” and “polluted.” (Chapple). This is something that is not discussed openly even though it affects more than half the population and is vital in being able to have children. Menstruating women are often secluded from daily life and society and are not to come in contact with non-bleeding, “normal” men and women during that time period. But how are women supposed to remain non-bleeding, and “normal” and still uphold their vital role as mothers?

For instance, in a study conducted on a group of 30 women in America with menorrhagia, a disorder associated with excessive bleeding during menstruation, (13 of whom were of South Asian descent) the South Asian women interviewed only seemed to
be contacting their general practitioners when they were losing a considerably larger amount of blood than their Caucasian counterparts. This implies that these women felt that losing even an excessive, unhealthy amount of menstrual blood was not a cause for concern. Furthermore, some women were concerned only when they thought they were losing “actual” or real blood. This implied that many South Asian women saw menstrual blood as being completely different than venous or arterial blood. Menstrual blood was dirty, not like the blood in the rest of the body (Chapple 1997). Many women who went to see their doctors about menorrhagia were sent away without any consultation. Most South Asian women suffered from excessive bleeding for long periods of time before they were referred to a specialist. Out of all the women interviewed, the South Asian women seemed to suffer the most from difficulties (but also seemed to get the least immediate care). Some women welcomed heavy periods because they were a sign of getting rid of bad blood and poisonous wastes. They believed the “more the better.” For this reason, many women did not even say anything when they first noticed signs of menorrhagia. Some found communication difficult and others were too embarrassed to discuss their gynecological problems with their male doctors (Chapple 1997). However, it also appears that some women’s concerns were not taken seriously. Clearly, women’s attitudes towards menorrhagia are simply an example of how the idea of menstrual blood is perceived. Instead of seeing menstruation as a healthy, necessary process that affects most women, menstrual blood is often seen as “dirty.” Menstruation is not a comfortable topic to discuss amongst many women of South Asian descent, yet the idea of child bearing is (Niaz).

How many children can *you* have?
Though there is a special importance placed on South Asian women in maintaining their roles as child bearers (Sahai), scientific studies show that South Asian women have lower fertilization and pregnancy rates than Caucasian women (Fertility Weekly). For example, polycystic ovary syndrome or PCOS is a syndrome associated with ovarian dysfunction. The incidence of this syndrome in the general population as evidenced by ultrasound is 20-33%. However, it has been reported to be as high as 52% for Asian Indian immigrants (living in the United Kingdom). Not only is the incidence of this syndrome considerably higher for South Asian women as compared to Caucasian women, but South Asian women with PCOS demonstrate a higher sensitivity to it and consequently a lower fertilization and pregnancy rates than Caucasian PCOS patients (Fertility Weekly). These women cannot always maintain their expectations to have children if these aspects of sexuality are not under their control.

“High Caste” or Social Outcast?

These patriarchal expectations come into the picture with widow marriages as well. Here the irony is a little more subtle: though some women are born or marry into a “higher class”, in reality it seems impossible for many women to truly be of a higher class.” This is largely due to the fact that women of higher classes are not allowed to remarry after they have been widowed. Since child marriages are still prevalent and many women are married off, and thus widowed at a young age, this tradition proves to be extremely detrimental to these women’s lives (Niaz). In many instances, participating in a higher class translates to avoiding social stigmas of “untouchability” and enjoying mobility in society. In reality, the caste system was never meant to discriminate against those of different castes. The caste system in Sanskrit is also called the “Varna” system. The root of the word Varna is “vri”
which means one’s occupation. The caste system was originally based on a division of labor and there was no such thing as a higher or lower caste. However, since it became common that children took on the occupations of their parents, “varna” became confused with “jati,” which means “birth.” Society began prescribing occupations as more prestigious or less prestigious, and hence families gained the same statuses. Some castes became honorable and the members of other castes remained “untouchables” (Pattangi).

Women of “higher” castes often suffer social death, or in many cases, actual death when many sacrifice themselves, or perform sati, after they lose their husbands. In Bhramanical Hinduism, women of higher castes serve primarily as symbols of purity for their families, lineage and caste. Since they are "terminologically assimilated" in their husbands' homes and families, the death of the husband also means the death of her socially valued role. After her husband’s death, a widow's sexuality is perceived as dangerous to the honor of her husband’s lineage, and to ensure her sexual death as well, a widow was "de-sexed" through a range of practices. She is expected to practice celibacy and loyalty to her husband’s memory. In this sense, even being a member of a “higher caste” does not mean women can enjoy the comforts and social recognition of anything close to a higher caste. For some women in these societies, social worth depends on her husband (Sahai).

On the contrary, women of lower castes are allowed to remarry. In fact, widow remarriage is one of the defining characteristics of being a member of a lower caste in Brahmanical Hinduism. They were relabelled “natrayat” castes, or literally, “widow remarrying” castes. However, the social acceptance of remarriage in craft societies is not a recognition of the sexual needs of women. Even in these “remarrying” castes, women are not free of repressive patriarchal structures. Instead it is a practice enforced to maximize
the utilization of their labor and their fertility. This in turn ensures a constant replenishment of the laboring and servicing class.

There are very specific, economic reasons why women in craft societies, i.e potters, carpenters, metal workers, are allowed to remarry after they are widowed. In fact, the stability of the hierarchically stratified Indian society is dependent upon the lower producing and laboring/service castes maximizing reproduction. Hence this practice, even in “lower” castes, is not meant to give women rights but rather to maintain social and economical stability.

Furthermore, the region's first detailed census, Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar, shows that there is a declining ratio of women to men among craft communities. Women’s population seems to have lowered over the last few centuries because of deaths from poverty and its associated symptoms: malnutrition, frequent pregnancies, deaths during childbirth, and inadequate medical care. This in turn caused a “shortage of wives” and craft societies had to come up with a response to this. This is another reason why widow remarriage was made acceptable in these societies.

Even though women in craft societies have a more significant role in the economic reproduction, this does not mean that their labor is recognized in equal regard to that of their husbands. The labor they produce is often done in the seclusion of their individual homes as an extension to domestic labor. Though this labor is crucial to the craft societies, it does not mean that women are given equal respect. Women do not receive professional trading and are banned from working on certain technological equipment. Women do not have ownership over the means of production nor do they make an income like men do.
There are also strict regulations on who a widow could remarry. In this entire scheme of rules and relations, however, women are treated as “conduits of relationships rather than equal partners in these transactions.” As argued by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, "The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures … (only as an object) … in the exchange, not as one of the partners…. This remains true even when the girl's feelings are taken into consideration, as moreover, is usually the case. In acquiescing to the proposed union, she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place, she cannot alter its nature” (Niaz).

This discrepancy is also evident by the fact that widowers (husbands who had lost their wives) of “lower” castes are allowed to remarry and these marriages are celebrated with full blown rituals as opposed to weddings of widows which are not celebrated with as much galore. This again highlights the importance of virginity and the patriarchal nature of the gender system. Furthermore, while widowers can marry virgin brides, widows are discouraged from marrying bachelors. Patriarchal rules dictate that a bachelor’s first bride should be a virgin. She could maybe enter a marriage with a bachelor who had first gone through a mock marriage ceremony or if the widow agreed to enter a polygynous marriage as a co-wife of an elder brother in law.

**The State: Empowering or Imprisoning?**

These are a just a few of the many issues surrounding this series of impossible standards. When violence against women is reported nationally, state governments in South Asia as well as in countries where there are large South Asian populations often attempt to counter these practices with stage legislation. However, state legislation alone will not do
the job. This is true in South Asian countries as well as in the Diaspora. For example, even though the language that coats this legislation is all about concern for women who are facing violence, from the beginning this legislation has really been about controlling minority populations in Britain. Much of this legislature is also ironical. For instance, from 2001 onwards, British politicians asserted that they, along with American forces, were bombing Afghanistan to rescue Afghan women from the Taliban. However, the Home Office tried to send Pakistani women back to villages in the very parts of Pakistan that had been the Taliban’s support base and were still under their control (Wilson).

It was against this background that the state began to propose policies that on the surface seemed to confront “Muslim patriarchy” since it was receiving pressure from South Asian women’s groups to respond to the sometimes extreme violence they faced. In 1999, there was a debate on forced marriages in the House of Commons. British officials urged “the leaders of the Asian Muslim community to encourage their people to put their daughters’ happiness, welfare, and human rights first. If they do, their community will progress and prosper, in line with the Sikh and Hindu communities.” This was problematic, however, because it suggested that 1. “Forced” marriages were the preserve of Muslims and 2. Muslims were poor and working class people. This debate led to a surge of racist articles in the British press about how brutal South Asian parents were to their girls who were much less mature than their white counterparts. Furthermore, instead of giving women agency, these articles made it seem like women were victims who had to be “rescued” from their violent circumstances. This practice was not foreign to South Asians, since the British used similar “debate” like methods while colonizing India in the past (Wilson).
Furthermore, it became clear that the Home Office was only concerned with marriages of British South Asian women and their South Asian husbands (because they would enter the U.K). There was no discussion of women from South Asian who underwent violence from their British South Asian husbands. This was because the forced marriage initiative acted to protect only the “civilized” (British) women: these women belonged to Britain as opposed to South Asian women who were the “others.”

Furthermore, throughout the last twenty years, the focal point of the state’s interventions has been concerned with the lack of individual “choice” that South Asian women face. This ignores power relations within the family and community and makes laws problematic. South Asian women had the fear of separation or breaking off from her family. These fears were justified because they had seen examples in the community in which women had been cut of in this way. So when there was an initiative in 2006 to make forced marriage a specific criminal offense, Women’s organizations actually responded strongly against it. They pointed out that the law would be useless since few daughters who wanted to escape coercive marriages would want to take their own parents to court. Furthermore, such laws would heighten racism and domestic violence which needed to be addressed within the framework of existing strategies on violence against women. Safety from violence required more places of safety and support. Provisions against forced marriages were counter productive because they took away such places. However, the British media began to link forced marriages directly with “honor killings” which in turn were linked with terrorism and “lack of integration.” Since South Asian women protested against the forced marriage provisions, the media began calling South Asian women spokespersons for these
“horrifying” backwards practices. When South Asian women attended meetings to discuss the forced marriage practices, they were often banned from talking (Wilson).

In Britain, the South Asian women’s movement has created a network of women to provide support and safety for women facing violence. They have been built up by grassroots feminists with enormous effort over the last thirty years. However, over the last four years, they suffered a difficult phase because of kickbacks in their funding. New Labor’s neoliberal welfare agenda meant that the needs of South Asian and other minority communities have been left behind (Wilson).

Ineffective legislation also arises from South Asian countries themselves. For example, the zina laws were part of the effort to bring laws into conformity with Islam in Pakistan. The Hadood ordinances were put into effect as a first step toward the process of Islamization in 1979, and these ordinances included the zina ordinance. The zina ordinance censures illicit sex and gives punishment for offenders based on particular readings of the sura. “If a woman and man are guilt of forcination: flog each of them with a hundred stripes” (Khan 7). However, the legal definition of zina blurs the lines between adultery, forcination, and rape. Women became victims of this Islamization and its inconsistencies. In many cases, women who made allegations against rape were convicted of adultery while the rapists themselves were acquitted. Though the Zina ordinance was intended to bring laws into conformity with Islam, its many set backs and loop holes actually lead to more women being abused and raped.

Some hope?

Many times legislature is problematic and actually is counterintuitive to its purpose. Instead, men often take advantage of such legislature and make claims that end up working
against women instead of for them. In order for women to leave this cycle of standards, we must first make society aware that these expectations are ironical and will forever be unmet if people continue to operate with the same ideology. Appropriate discourse and education are necessary to initiate this discussion. We must first be critical of this patriarchal system leads women to consider themselves as lesser and insecure. Even their inability to stand up for themselves is a result of what they have lived and have been taught about their roles, rights, and appropriate behavior. Unless we get rid of this ideology, some women are going to continue to think acts of violence are acceptable. Rapes are going to remain unreported. Domestic Violence is never going to be considered violence, menstruation is always going to be dirty, and so on and so forth.

Another possible way to start addressing these issues is to look at the religious claims behind them. Many will argue that religious texts prescribe certain practices for women, but in reality, this is only a societal interpretation. Often passages from texts like the Kuran are distorted and interpretations violate the basic Islamic rights of decency, integrity, and justice for all people (Naaman). For instance, in the Kuran, punishments for adultery apply to both men and women equally. However, in reality, mostly women receive a punishment of death for adultery at even the smallest hint of improper behavior (Naaman).

In regards to the caste system, we can see evidence from the Gita, one of the main scriptures of Hinduism, that the hierarchy in the caste system is also socially created. “Higher” and “lower” castes are not inherently in the Hindu scriptures. Chapter 4, Verse 13 of the Gita roughly translates as “according to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them, (The Lord) created the four divisions of human society
(Pattangi). Hence, most interpretations of the caste system are made and enforced by the people. The core of “religion” itself does not prescribe socially “higher” or “lower” statues upon people.

Finally, women must be given agency in order for them to have any sort of movement in society. Though the media is and has been an important tool to convey ideas of patriarchy, it can also act to portray images of agency as well. One example of a film in which the main character practices some agency is *Bend it like Bekham*. Though I do not appreciate how the main character, Jasminder, or “Jess” discards some of her traditions all together: “who wants to cook Aloo Gobi when you can bend a ball like Beckham,” it is important to acknowledge how she is willing to go against norms her parents put upon her and pursue her own dreams in a productive manner. Her mother believes that being able to cook and being a “proper Indian girl” is the most important thing for her to be able to find someone to marry. She says “At least I taught her full Indian dinner, the rest is up to God” and “What family would want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can't make round chapattis?” Her mother behaves with the premise that an Indian girl’s worth is determined by her ability to keep her family healthy and well fed. Girls who play sports are going against this tradition and not abiding to their femininity. Towards the end of the film, Jess convinces her parents to allow her to pursue her dream of playing football in America. This film was a positive example in that it showed an Indian woman acting in a “non traditional” role and instead pursuing a physical activity that required her to be independent and non-conformist.

**Conclusion**
The claims in this paper do not sum up every South Asian woman’s experience: I must recognize that women of different families, communities, regions can all have different experiences. Even though each woman has her own experiences, this does not mean we can forget the larger cultural, political frameworks that feed these ideologies. We must be cautious of the media, cultural, and even religious interpretations people are surrounded by. After all, it people who create ideologies, people who make laws, and people who commit acts of violence. People feed off of each other’s ideas of gender norms, traditions, and health, and hence create a framework for women from which it seems impossible to escape. However, if we continue to be critical of these ideologies, state reform, religious interpretations, and messages from popular culture, we can work together to create spaces where women feel comfortable to practice some agency.