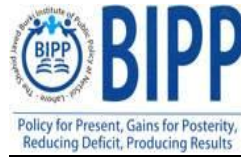


Issue Brief # IB-08-2017

November 30, 2017

Limits to Freedom of Gender Equalizing Expression

Asad Ejaz Butt



Limits to Freedom of Gender Equalizing Expression

Asad Ejaz Butt¹

Background and Context

To say that to go out with a naked body isn't shameless anymore, in fact it has become an expression to shame whosoever sees it, wouldn't be a misrepresentation of the social transition that has subtly taken place. Surely not in the Islamic world but in the West where the unfettered growth of feminism is, according to many, not only a challenge to the domination and superiority of men but a reversal of the existing perceived gender hierarchies.

The defiant surge in feminism is arguably on course to endanger the security of men who often find themselves suffocated and mentally harassed during the overtly aggressive, reformist and emphatic feminist protests and demonstrations and who knows we start seeing "masculinist" organizations and activism working to end the harassment, exploitation and marginalization of the male members of the society in the next few decades. This might seem like an exaggeration of the pace at which feminism is progressing, but the recent turn of global events has predicted nothing but that.

Gender equality, especially in light of this year's 'International Women's Day' agenda 'Leave No One Behind' seems to be at the centre of the global development focus. However, if the feminist movement that is on course to create a more economically and socially gender equal world embarks on ways and methods that do to strengthen gender inequalities and violate and endanger the physical sanctities of women themselves, then the movement is surely misguided and less likely to achieve targets set at the conferences in Beijing in 1995 and during other UN Women deliberations before and after Beijing.

Gender Equalizing Protestations and Expressions

A startling event² shook the world in July. Hostile and fuming radical feminists took to the streets in Argentina to stage a demonstration that could be regarded as unique but extremely bold and queer in many ways. The women who came wrapped in sheets of warm, wintery clothing were soon seen undressing themselves to give a symbolic message to the Argentinian government and the rest of the world that the female body is objectified and thus exploited and misused by mostly men who only take it as a source to fulfill their sexual desires. According to media reports, the disgruntled women took to

¹ The writer is the Acting Director of the Burki Institute of Public Policy (BIPP).

²See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1332047/Naked-women-protest-objectification-outside-Argentinian-congress.html>

the streets in response to a reported increase in rape and femicide in Argentina. Well, the cause and the underlying reason to protest, absolutely legit and justified, the ways adopted to do so, maybe not so much.

This was a reminder that feminism and that too in its crudest form is on the rise and the wave has a reformist agenda that can manifest itself through forms and mediums of expression regarded as bold and obscene even to the extent of becoming socially unacceptable at times. The question that arises therefore, is whether undressing publicly, though giving out a very loud and clear message to the world that whosoever exploits the female body or objectifies it as a product that can be bought, sold, or misused to fulfill sexual desires, will be shamed, is socially acceptable or not? Is anything short of this acceptable, if yes what can those manifestations and forms of expression tentatively include.

Limits to Freedom of Equalizing Expressions

One could also use it as an impetus to kick off the limits of liberty and freedom of expression debate. If naked bodies on display - meant to shame the largely male members of the society that objectify and exploit the female body – are justified since it should be the right of women to express resentment the way they wish to against the discriminatory and patriarchal ways of the society. Or should there be limits to libertarianism that disallow expressions beyond the acceptable social and public conduct. Clearly, such a debate must begin from determination of how acceptable social and public conduct is defined and understood.

In context of the recent instances of rape and femicide in Argentina, the demonstrations which were slightly on the fence when it comes to the divide between radical and liberal feminism were powerful and cogent enough to provoke a sense of shame and despondency amongst the male members of the Argentinian society, some of whom came out to retaliate the rape occurrences terming them to be cowardly, apathetic and reminders of that fact that the society needs to rebalance so as to include the social, political and economic rights, liberties and security of women as equal members.

The pertinent question is whether the public space should've been used to unleash such a crude form of expression that painted the most horrific form of human reality. A reality that men, are lustful, exploitative and completely oblivious to the emotional and physical sanctity of women and that the shaming of women exploiters must be made public even at the cost of undressing and violating the same sanctity of the female body that the feminists themselves vow to cover and protect. While the patriarchal ways of the society must be condemned and a desired socially, politically and economically equitable and egalitarian society must be the desired end, there is definitely a case that the feminist agenda that has incentivized women to include means such as this (undressing publicly) is not entirely compatible with that of the pioneer feminists of the 70's.

The Global Feminist Movement

Considering the recent surge of radical feminism and the outburst of events such as ones that took place in Argentina, one is often compelled to question the feminist agenda – is everything about it absolutely fair, just and legitimate. Well, it's a dodgy question and a rational response to it must begin from a clear and delineable definition of feminism that enjoys a certain degree of acceptability amongst scholars and policy makers whose opinion matters around the world – people of scholarly eminence and influence so to say.

Is feminism a social movement with gender equality as its end? Considering the current feminist regime, this definition either never existed or has ceased to remain relevant. The question also arises if there is a single, unified global feminist agenda that inspires the works and activities of feminist academics and activists around the world. Or, is feminism, as a movement and an ideology, understood uniformly and in the same vein across the globe – certainly not, and while that is detrimental to the establishment of a non-discriminatory and egalitarian society, it also works mechanically against the gender equality agenda of feminism itself.

Scholars seem to raise other qualified concerns too, like if radical feminism is counter-productive or it can bring an end to the prevalent forms of oppression, marginalization and exploitation of women and the female body? Is feminism set out to challenge patriarchy or create a reverse social structure comprising of female dominance? If socio-political equity is the desired end of feminism, why 'special' rights, securities and protections often demanded and accorded to women – for instance the women protection bill passed by the Punjab assembly in Pakistan. Is it that since feminism is considered inherently liberal and reformist, it won't be considered conservative or non-liberal no matter how radical its ways and manifestations.

Conclusion

These are essential questions that academics, scholars and policymakers working on the feminist agenda must address before they embark on female protection programs and also that international feminist scholars must enter in a discourse to fixate the limits of liberty and freedom of equalizing expression, especially when it comes to reformist and egalitarian movements and demonstrations like those that took place in Argentina. The discourse in the field has certainly progressed but a consensus, especially with regards to limits of libertarianism is far from being achieved.

.....