

Book Review

Silent Voices, Untold Stories: Women Domestic Workers in Pakistan and Their Struggle for Empowerment. By Ayesha Shahid. Karachi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. xxiii, 247 pages.

Reviewed by
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Silent Voices, Untold Stories by Ayesha Shahid is a groundbreaking socio-legal study about law, empowerment and access to justice for women domestic labor in Pakistan. It attempts to fill the gap in existing literature on the subject of women and empowerment with particular reference to female domestic workers in Pakistan.

The book is theoretically refined and practically linked to the real live stories of the women domestic workers in Pakistan. From the theoretical standpoint, the author has sought assistance from the feminist and Islamic perspectives to add value to her analysis. She has employed the methodology of grounded theory to conduct her research. This manner of doing research indicates that the author's analysis does not grow out of presuppositions and assumptions; rather, the starting point of the book is the field work she carried out.

The author has explored the real life stories of the domestic workers and brought to light the hidden aspects of their human existence. Such a task could not have been accomplished without spending a reasonable amount of time with the domestic workers. The author has mentioned in her book that she had conducted interviews with individuals and semi structured groups of domestic workers at different sites in Karachi and Peshawar.

Another noteworthy aspect of the book is that the author used the literature from across the North-South divide as a template to draw

analogies between the situation of women domestic workers in Pakistan and other countries of the world. Thereafter, the same has been tested through empirical work undertaken for the present study. The author has also made use of literary pieces from India and Pakistan such as novels, short stories and poems to highlight the plight of domestic workers. Such literary work has been relied upon by the author for her analysis due to the fact that there is no academically accomplished research available on domestic workers in Pakistan.

Shahid's elaboration on the lived realities of the women domestic workers is demonstrative of the niceties of gender relationship in society. It has rightly been pointed out that the male domestic workers are treated on a different pedestal than that of the women domestic workers in terms of economic benefits (e.g. salary and other allowances) and human treatment (e.g. respect and honor). On the other hand, the work of the women domestic workers is underpaid and undervalued. They are expected to carry out tasks not specifically assigned to them in addition to their original responsibilities. They are supposed to spend more time at their workplace beyond what was agreed upon between them and their employers. Last but not least, it is the class of domestic workers most susceptible to sexual harassment by their employers. Thus, the status of the women domestic workers is far less than what is generally enjoyed by their male counterparts.

As noted earlier, the book is a socio-legal study of domestic workers in Pakistan, and one might rightly ask what sort of contribution the book has made in the legal arena. Shahid has resorted to the approach of legal pluralism, rather than banking upon legal centralism, to argue that the positivist approach to law would be insufficient to address the issues faced by the domestic workers. Moreover, she has analyzed the implications of a legal void on the subject of domestic workers in Pakistan and how is it shaping the day to day real lives of these workers. Domestic workers have recourse to the general legal remedies available in the Pakistani legal framework, such as filing of writ petitions, registration of first information reports for offence committed against them, and civil

suits for recovery of their unpaid salaries and damages. Yet these remedies are ineffective and futile for a number of reasons, including differential social and economic statuses of the parties. Employers are well placed in society whereas the domestic workers form its lowest ebb and are largely unorganized.

Shahid has also addressed the issue of how the legal gap regarding the domestic workers should be filled. She has problematized the belief that the introduction of a new and specialized legislative framework for the domestic workers would prove a panacea for all evils faced and suffered by them. Their sufferings are manifold and they are not solely attributable to the absence of a well-structured legal framework catering to their needs. Their sufferings are either linked to or multiplied by their lower social and economic status in society. Thus, the mechanism to provide remedy to the domestic workers should be comprehensive enough to take into account these factors as well.

Shahid suggests that the domestic work force should be included in the definition of ‘worker’ by amending the labor code so that they may also avail the remedies mentioned therein for the labor class in Pakistan. Domestic work should also be recognized as a service industry and productive labor. In addition to their recognition on the same pedestal as the general labor class, there is a need to carry out a survey for documentation of the domestic workers in Pakistan. One may appreciate the difficulty of the last suggestion made by the author, but without attempting to collect comprehensive data we would not be in a position to introduce any viable and long lasting program for their social uplift and economic empowerment. Activism on the part of the domestic worker will also be handy in realizing the dream of living an honorable human life. Domestic workers should mobilize and organize themselves into groups so that they may take up their concerns more effectively.

The author has only concentrated on a couple of major cities in Pakistan for her data collection. A lot of the domestic work force is engaged in rural areas of the country, and their plight is even worse than those employed as such in big cities. They are not paid in cash and are

expected to share in kind when crops are cut twice or thrice a year. Had Shahid given voice also to this latter group, it would have added greater cogency and comprehensiveness to her study.

Silent Voices, Untold Stories should appeal to a wide range of readers. For women's organizations, it provides a wakeup call lest the harm caused to the domestic workers would grow out of control. For human rights academics, it analyzes a hitherto unexplored area of victims of human rights' violations. For labor unions and activists, it serves as a reminder that many of their own class are still denied the full protections of the law. For policy makers, it is a cautionary note that one cannot exclusively rely on formal legal mechanisms to address the plight of domestics workers in Pakistan. For students of law and gender, it peels back the layered gendered realities of the day to day lives of the domestic workers.