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Women on motorbikes — what's the problem?

Putting limits on the woman's freedom to travel was invented by men to preserve their power.

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For a Pakistani woman seeking to travel on a motorcycle, socially sanctioned rules define how she may sit. Although unwritten and unspoken, these are inviolable: First, no girl or woman may drive a motorcycle or clasp the handlebars with both hands. Second, although she can be a passenger behind a male driver, she cannot straddle the pillion seat. Instead, she must perch herself with both legs on the same side and hope she will not fall off. To sit otherwise is considered a violation of female modesty.

With millions of motorcycles already in the country and their number growing daily, one might have supposed that the matter would have been discussed in some public forum. But I was unable to find a mention anywhere. This is somewhat strange. More controversial topics such as family planning, child abuse, and wife-beating have received at least some attention. This one has received none.

Clearly, the prohibition on driving of motorcycles by Pakistani women arises from a social taboo enforced by creating a sense of shame. Riding bicycles falls into the same category. A taboo, says the dictionary, is the prohibition of an action based upon moral judgment or religious belief. Taboos lead to discomfiture and must therefore be swept under the rug, never discussed.

This particular taboo comes at considerable social cost. A common sight on today's roads is the middle-class family which, unable to afford a car, must perforce travel on a motorcycle. The precariously balanced mother, sitting to the side, clasps a child or two with one hand. With the other, she fearfully grasps at whatever else she can. The husband's hands securely grip the handlebars while he accelerates and brakes through dense traffic and over pot-holed roads. A male motorcyclist is required by law to wear a safety helmet, but his female passenger is not. Expectedly, in an accident, she usually gets hurt more.

It was quite different in the 1970s and earlier. While living in the middle-class area of Rawalpindi known as Satellite Town, my wife would sit behind me while straddling the pillion and securely holding on to our baby daughter. We were not the only ones. In Islamabad — then a town for the elite — young women driving motorbikes could occasionally be seen. This no longer happens. My physicist friends in Iran and Turkey say they, too, are seeing a gradual disappearance of woman motorbike drivers in their countries. In Iran and Turkey, as in Pakistan, women may still drive cars. But in Saudi Arabia this is not allowed.

What explains the travel restrictions for women, as well as the recent changes? One answer can be sought in the work of anthropologists belonging to the school of thought known as 'cultural materialism'. These social scientists say that economic and ecologic reasons account for everything one sees in society, including taboos. Marvin Harris (1927-2001) of Columbia University, who authored *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*, was perhaps the most well known among them.

Harris argued that "even the most bizarre-seeming beliefs and practices" are a result of ordinary conditions arising from "guts, sex, energy, wind, rain," and a "host of ordinary phenomena" built by circumstances. His book explains why the hungry peasants of India do not kill and eat the 'sacred' cows which roam the country at will. The reason he gives is plausible: Killing cows was like economic abortion in earlier times when draught animals were critical to agriculture. If you ate the cattle, there wouldn't be enough left for the plough and there would be no crops. Hence eating cows had to be tabooed.

But with mechanised agriculture, the original reason for sacredising cows has nearly disappeared. Traditions, however, change very slowly and so most Hindus still abhor the idea of eating beef. On the other hand, the imperatives of modernity do

not allow ancient traditions to persist forever and India is modernising. Among my Hindu friends I can count several who relish beef steaks and beef burgers.

Let us return to motorbikes. Had Harris been asked he would probably have argued as follows: if women are allowed to ride motorbikes just as men do, this would increase their mobility as well as their choices in life (jobs, shopping, friends, etc.). Greater independence, in turn, would seriously challenge the system of patriarchy. In a patriarchy the father and other males rule over the women of the family, or male bosses rule over their women employees. Putting limits on the woman's freedom to travel was, therefore, invented by men to preserve their power.

This begs the question why most traditional cultures, including Arabia, were patriarchal. Anthropologists say this arose from early survival needs of humans. The woman was better suited for nourishing and training the male progeny for the sake of the family, but ill-suited for the battlefield which brought in the booty. Under patriarchy, it therefore made sense for a woman to accept subordination in return for financial and physical security. Like cattle, women ultimately became property that needed to be protected.

But just as the tractor-plough forever removed the need to sacredise the cow, modern technology has removed the reasons which once made male control inevitable. The nature of modern work in an increasingly computer dominated world is such that both men and women can perform equally well. In industrial and post-industrial societies, women's salaries are steadily approaching those of men's. As for warfare, it is now more and more a matter of pushing buttons.

Pakistani women have definitely been pushed back by the rise of anti-women organisations and the Taliban. But in spite of the dedicated efforts of Al Huda and other such pro-patriarchy organisations, egalitarianism is inevitable. Shooting Malala Yousufzai was undoubtedly a setback for female education in Swat but one can expect more education there in the future, not less. Survival needs in modern times make it impossible to ban women from travelling on motorcycles, even if this is presently done in such a dangerous and unnatural way. In time — measured in decades perhaps — Pakistani women shall surely sit naturally on their motorcycles and hold the handlebars with the clutch, accelerator, and brake firmly in their hands.

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