

## More from this page

1. [Climate security](#)
2. [Big-2 block progress](#)
3. [Lady Reading Hospital](#)
4. [Document verification](#)



BY ZUBEIDA MUSTAFA

# Peace women

THE Tehreek-i-Niswan and Sheema Kermani have always been at the forefront when matters of peace are at stake. Many performances by the Tehreek have been directed at protesting the brutality of violence against and oppression of women. Hence it was quite in keeping with its character that the group convened a 'peace table' on Oct 15, at the Karachi Arts Council. Here hundreds of women and also men assembled to reinforce the widely held, but unimplemented, belief that female involvement in peacemaking improves the chances of lasting security.

A landmark resolution (1325) was adopted by the UN Security Council 15 years ago calling for women to be included in decision-making positions at every level of peacemaking. It has so far made a nominal impact. The head of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, admits that globally "women's participation at peace tables is still symbolic or low".

Hence the global campaign to boost Resolution 1325 that was initiated last year by a Philippine women's group should be welcomed as it will hopefully create more awareness. We need to recognise the significant role women can play not only in promoting peace but also in bringing peace in times of conflict.

'Peace tables', as these conferences were dubbed, were organised on the same day in 11 countries to create a strong and informed public opinion. More are expected to join later. It is a matter of satisfaction that a section of our women are conscientized enough to take the lead on peace issues and demand inclusion in peace negotiations when they are calculatedly sidelined.

It is generally said that women are excluded from peace processes because of the absence of political will, lack of financing and accountability and because of patriarchal attitudes. All these factors apply in Pakistan's case as well where no woman is generally included in peace talks. But there is an additional factor that Sheema decided to focus on, namely the very low status of women in Pakistan.

The peace table held sessions on education, women's economic empowerment, violence against women and women's participation in politics. The fact is that women who are not empowered in these terms cannot be

public space for herself and develop the skills to make herself economically independent and assertive.

Eventually, what emerged from the peace table, as pointed out by political and social activist Saleha Athar, was that the role women play in politics determines their effectiveness as peacemakers. Saleha was spot on when she said that the *avam* were not involved/interested in decisions taken by political leaders to serve the interest of the capitalist class with which leaders were hand in glove.

In this scheme of things, women are disadvantaged on three fronts. They are pushed against the wall by patriarchy, the class divide and religion. The few who manage to reach the higher ranks of leadership — Benazir Bhutto was specifically mentioned — are not free to work for women's rights especially when there is a clash with capitalist-vested interests.

This has been a global problem. Women in a minority in government have had to submit to the male interest for their political survival. They have had to act like men. For change to be effected it is important that a 'critical mass' of female presence be created to initiate and then to sustain

collective action of a distinct kind to protect women's interests.

After so many years of feminism, one would have thought the entry of even a handful of women in any institution should have given them the elbow room to open the doors of opportunity for many more. This should not have been impossible given the spread of education among a cross-section of women without compromising on merit.

Regrettably, this has not happened thanks to the dynamics of the class divide and the religious forces that Saleha Athar talked about at the peace table. The gender factor has been overtaken by class considerations and religiosity. Without the critical mass of women, the change one had hoped for has not materialised in politics

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are not empowered in these terms cannot be peacemakers at any level.

In some cases, women who have been victims of violence and rape ultimately emerge as stronger persons and their strength enables them to play a positive role in crisis situations. But we also know that such women are an exception and to make their courage and character the norm there is the need to empower women generally.

Similarly, a woman who has been denied education can hardly ever hope to create

materialised in politics.

Without the emergence of women in politics in sufficient numbers UN Security Council Resolution 1325 remains on paper only. As two delegates to a conference in New York — one from Libya and the other from Syria — sarcastically observed, the only qualification a participant needed to be included in a peace conference was to be the wielder of a gun. And women generally didn't carry one. ■

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- [1. Climate security](#)
- [2. Big-2 block progress](#)
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- [4. Document verification](#)



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