

Pakistan White Ribbon

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I landed in Lahore late at night in an uneasy state, worried I might soon be the victim of some horrific bombing or terrorist attack in what was considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world. DFAT had flatly advised against travel to Pakistan. But I had spoken to enough people with local knowledge that I felt things would be OK.



The first news article I read profiled a young man who had his head and moustache shaved by the Taliban for listening to dance music. Thereafter, I quickly packed away my iPod.

After a day of orientation and tending to tidbits with a local employee, Abid, our program began with a seminar to a local university- called DC College. It was a historical institution that was obviously a throwback to a colonial past. The grounds were very impressive and I was informed by the country director, Omer Aftab, that the place had recently shackled itself from the rule of Muslim extremists who had outlawed the interaction of men between women. This was evident immediately when male and female students could be seen interacting with ease- laughing, cajoling and abusing each other as is normal in our part of the world.

My companion was Omer Aftab, who was the brains and energy behind the local White Ribbon campaign. Bringing years of experience in both the corporate and NGO sector, he set up the office 3 years ago, having had contact with the idea several years prior. In 3 years it had grown considerably, becoming a major force in women's empowerment in general. Omer, along with his trusty lieutenant Samar Nigaar, a young female law graduate and old friend of Omer's, had taken White Ribbon to a number of towns and small districts, established hundred of volunteers promoting it in their local communities and launched associated projects relating to breast cancer awareness and female entrepreneurship. A notable achievement was attracting Cherie Blair to launch the breast cancer awareness campaign known as the Pink Ribbon program.

The prelude to the talks involved a locally produced documentary which showed the various activities of White Ribbon Pakistan, from arm wrestling tournaments in schools to macho boxers speaking of their opposition to violence against women. It was part of preaching a message that " a strong man was a gentleman" who would not engage or condone any act of violence against women. The documentary also profiled a man who expressed his disapproval of the campaign suggesting it was a Western implant, that violence was justified under certain conditions and women

needed to be protected from vice to maintain social order. Furthermore, he added that his ideas were clearly sanctioned by God.

The dissenting man's ideas were important because it was a clear indication of what the local campaign was up against. Some surveys have suggested that over half of Pakistani men believe that it is acceptable to beat women if their actions warrant it. Such actions would usually include consorting with other men, dressing inappropriately or leaving the house without permission. Along this line of thinking, adultery or pre-marital sex would be considered very serious and warrant more serious punishment than a beating.

I gave a talk about the underlying features of violence and women, gender issues, the changing nature of masculinity and particularities regarding South Asian cultures and Islam. As I had been in the country only a day, my Australian accent was not as tempered as I would have liked. The talk was well understood however and engaged good interaction. Based on the feedback, it was clear from the beginning that religion was one of the key battlefronts, something acknowledged by the campaign who have sought to engage religious scholars in some of their events.

The local Dean of the College informed me that the issue was indeed a very important one and spoke of his prior experience teaching at the major university in Lahore- the University of Punjab- where the student wing of the Islamic extremist party dominated and made it very difficult for male-female interactions. Of course, hypocrisy was rife, because the same Islamists would see it as their right to demand sex from some women when they pleased or punish them with violence, abuse or difficulty passing their examinations.

By the end of the morning it was clear this region of Pakistan, Punjab, where almost 60% of the population lived, was a far cry from the media images dominated by the Taliban. It was a sophisticated culture and people in a relatively well developed part of the subcontinent. Its population density was also considerably less than most parts of India or Bangladesh. However, there was definitely a fear enveloping the populace and institutions, as the omnipresent security attested as well as the stories of threats from extremists towards anyone who dared to criticise them.

Later that afternoon we flew to a large regional town called Multan, a centre of Sufism and home of the Prime Minister. The following three days involved various talks at major universities, usually in social science departments to avoid too much attention and the wrath of Islamists. It also involved meeting local volunteers who would speak of their experiences, filled with challenges and some successes. It was clear from meeting the volunteers attempting to help sufferers and engage other men that they were up against it. They spoke of how almost no women or their families would want to speak openly lest their families be shamed and dishonoured. They spoke of how it was impossible to engage police or the legal system due to costs and, very often, disinterest. If it even reached this level, women and their families were usually paid off with some ease to avoid trial or prosecutions. The government had

set up crisis centres and refuges which were very rarely used due to the associated stigma.

I felt both inspired by the determination of local volunteers and a little demoralised by the scope of their challenge. We supported their actions and argued that their very presence in these communities was of great significance.

A particularly interesting aspect of this trip was driving 100 kms to a town adjacent to the desert, Bawalhpur. I learnt that Arab sheikhs had built palaces nearby to undertake hunting activities. They had built schools and hospitals in the region to appease the locals and the government. They would spend several months a year living there, hunting a range of animals, especially a rare bird prized for its aphrodisiac properties.

Our job involved engaging a group of media studies' students. By then I had been able to modify my speeches, speaking more slowly and giving the most challenging content quickly. I had learnt this because there would often be a host of academics speaking for lengthy periods before our organisation had a chance to say anything, in spite of the seminars being organised so that we could present our message.

Furthermore, many of these pre-emptive messages would often preach the exact opposite of White Ribbon i.e that violence was OK in certain situations and that the onus was on women to avoid violence by not engaging in wrongful activities. I was informed by Samar that this was a problem they often had to face but that it was not helpful to get these departments on the wrong side. As she underlined, we were visiting some of the more liberal arenas of the society!

The latter talks in particular garnered great interest among students, both related to the message of anti-violence and a broader inspirational message I tried to impart about their abilities and potential and how the modern world allows seemingly modest voices from far flung places to exert great influence. I felt comfortable speaking my mind in these settings, openly stating some strains of Islam's interpretations could be challenged and women needed protection from the very idea that they needed so much protection. I also argued that what was usually being protected in such instances was male honour and prestige, but done so under the guise of protecting women.

A final event involved a theatre group within an industrial worker's dialogue. This was within a textiles factory and involved several hundred men and women. They were poor and illiterate and my English would have been incomprehensible. Instead they were treated to a theatre group mimicking certain situations relating to violence against women and the underlying attitudes that promoted it. I was most impressed by the level of engagement among the workers and their level of interest in the interaction.

In the end it was 4 days of virtually non stop events in 3 different cities. It attracted a host of new volunteers to White Ribbon Pakistan in more regional areas that need the message most of all and where the local office was attempting to gain greater penetration. It was hugely inspiring to myself and source of great education. It was also pretty sobering.

Pakistan is currently one of the great fronts in the battle for democracy and human freedoms. There is a real struggle between liberal ideas and pre-modern authoritarianism in the guise of religion. It threatens to hold back the potential of millions of people, in particular young men and women with starry eyes for their futures. White Ribbon Pakistan represents a much broader urgency for women's development as the cornerstone of social and economic progress, of which anti-violence is an integral part. Its work is also challenging some of the deepest held beliefs around which the society is organised. The staff, led by Omer and Samar, deserve our deepest admiration and support. I myself am deeply grateful for the opportunity and will remember it with great fondness.