

BASHIR'S MOTHER'S SYNDROME

Pages with reference to book, From 53 To 54

She had an enchanting beauty about her. Her dark smooth skin, curly hair tied in tight braids and pearly white teeth gave her a distinguished look. I had met her once or twice when she came to fetch water from our garden tap. With one pitcher skillfully balanced on her head and the other on her hip, she had carried the precious liquid carefully to her home in the Kachbi Abadi near the Society where we live. I never came to know her name. It was through the three sons she had given birth to that she had whatever social status she enjoyed. Hence it was through them that she was known. "Bashir's mother" — that is how she was called, as though she did not have an identity of her own. Bashir we knew quite well. He came every morning and evening when Faquir Mohammad, his father, could not come to clean the car and water the garden. They were Makranis and quite proud of their tradition and culture. All the sons had attended school and in their social circle, they were regarded as a highly cultured family. One day neither father nor son came to work in the morning. It was a bit unusual. They did not come in the evening either, but there was a message from them. They could not come because Bashir's mother was ill. She had not awakened from her sleep in the morning. They had first tried to shake her out of her stupor. But she would not stir. By mid-morning the news had spread like wild-fire in the neighborhood. Curious women pretending to be sympathetic had poured into the little house. Each of them had a suggestion or two. All the old tricks were tried. Water was sprinkled on the patient's face. All kinds of pungent substances were taken near her nostrils so that she could inhale their odour. Red hot coals were kept near the bedside and herbs sprinkled on them to give out strong fumes. But Bashir's mother lay still, groaning at times. Nothing would draw her out of her deep sleep. When I came to know of her condition, I was worried. Had a doctor seen her? Did she need to be hospitalised? How did one go about arranging for an ambulance? I could have saved myself the torture. For Faquir Mohammad informed me with a sense of proud resignation, "We don't show our women to the doctor." Why, but she is seriously ill. Will a female doctor be acceptable? "No. Our custom does not allow a stranger to examine our women. Their sanctity would be violated." Let her be taken to the hospital where she will be away from the restricting customs of the biradari. "That is inconceivable. Our women do not leave the protection of the home. Please don't press me because if I do that my community will disown me." The same evening as dusk fell Bashir's mother died. She succumbed to her illness without having received any medical aid whatsoever. For ten hours she lay struggling for life in the heart of a city of eight million. There were at least three doctors and two chemist stores within a quarter mile radius of her home. Medical aid was to be had just for the asking. The lifting of our telephone receiver could have summoned an ambulance. But all that was shunned. The woman who had toiled outside the home to fetch water so that the men could eat, drink, bathe and wash was forbidden to leave the home when she needed to for her own health need. The doctor's entry to her home was barred when she lay ill. Not that her sons and husband would never go to a doctor when they felt unwell. It was not the medical profession that was suspect. The men felt no compunctions at visiting a hospital. The problem lay in the patient. It was the status accorded to the woman that determined the entire family's, nay biradari's, approach to her health needs. Statistics regarding the appalling health status of women actually point to a problem that has two dimensions. The higher mortality rate of women and female infants and the lower life expectancy of women testified to by the country's sex ratio of 100 women to 110 men indicate that something is amiss in the health sector. One is, of course, the inadequate health delivery system which additionally discriminates against women. Fewer women doctors — only 21 per cent of Pakistan's doctors are women means many women are denied medical care, given the sexist bias in our socio-cultural norms. But there is also another factor: people's reluctance to allow a woman to be examined by a doctor, even a female one. This "Bashir's mother's syndrome" still operates in our

society on quite a wide scale. This is something which needs to be addressed in all seriousness, while expanding the network of health facilities in the country.

Zubeida Mustafa