

"I AM A TRANSGENDER ACTIVIST AND A NORMAL HUMAN BEING"



REHAN ANSARI



is a Brooklyn-based writer, playwright, and artist who also works as a political pollster and measures impact in the field of art and social justice. In 2016 his play *Unburdened* was staged at Meet Factory, Prague. *Unburdened* is based on Partition narratives he collected. He contributed an essay for *Revolution From Without...*, the first in a two-year series of exhibitions on resistance and revolutionary gesture at The 8th Floor, the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation's (SDRF) exhibition and event space. For two years for SDRF he has done a series of interviews on making art in a time of crisis.

AISHA MUGHAL



is a UNDP Expert Consultant to the Ministry of Human Rights, Government of Pakistan. She is the first transgender woman lecturer in Pakistan and the world's first transgender woman to represent her government as part of a national delegation at the UN (CEDAW Committee) in Geneva, Switzerland. She was a member of the National Task Force on Transgender Bill and has played an important role in the enactment of Transgender Persons (protection of rights) Act 2018. She has also served as a focal person for transgender rights at the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), Government of Pakistan.

Rehan Ansari talks to Aisha Mughal about activism, Transgender Persons Act of 2018 in Pakistan, and its implementation.

Rehan: What do you consider your landmark achievements in your career as an activist?

Aisha: I am proud of being able to get a trans person appointed to the National College of Art in 2014. That was a first in the history of Pakistan. That helped us break a negative stereotype about the community. That person ran the cafeteria and interacted with everybody at the college. Also, it was a job and jobs are what the community lacks. Then I would say my participation in lobbying efforts with the government for trans rights. That led to me becoming part of the national task force responsible for drafting the transgender rights law.

Rehan: How did the law come about?

Aisha: It was a two-year-long process with many meetings with government stakeholders, the bill had to go to the committees, and through both Houses of Parliament. We were able to convince everybody, including the religious authorities, about the importance of the transgender law. It was passed in May 2018.

Rehan: What is your next objective?

Aisha: My job description at the Ministry of Human Rights and as UNDP consultant is to ensure the implementation of every chapter and section of this law. We have framed policies for different government departments. Guidelines for the police on how to treat transgender prisoners and for doctors on how they must deal with transgender citizens. The Act gives a wide range of rights. The right to identity, to property, and all rest of the rights given to men and women with the exception of the right to marriage.

Rehan: Are things moving in the right direction?

Aisha: Yes. The government and international organisations are organising awareness campaigns. Documentaries are being made, seminars and workshops developed. It's a huge change that the federal government is accepting transgender employees. One other success we have had is that we have space at the table when there is any draft of any guideline being developed for transgender people. The government is also working with NGOs that are led by transgender people. Parliamentarians raise questions about the safety of transgender people. We are also seeing progress in society. Back in 2015 when I was doing my MA thesis I was the only student in my university who was working on trans rights. But now I see many students in many departments doing research on trans subjects.

Rehan: Thank you for informing us from your vantage point about these changes in institutions as well as in society. You seem to have an interesting position of being both an activist and in government.

Aisha: Yes. I represent the trans community in the government and I represent the government to the trans community. I work at sensitising government institutions to trans realities and on the other hand, I reach out to the grassroots of which I am part. I am part of the hijra community. All this means I do things beyond my job description. The activist in me is always awake receiving calls 24/7 about problems of community members.



Photo Credit: Tribune.pk

Rehan: How did this begin for you? Were you always aware that you would play this role?

Aisha: As a teenager, I was driven to study gender identity and the law and volunteer with a non-profit. I never thought I would work with the government. What I knew I had was something about my own identity and my rights and I was vocal. As part of this NGO, we would meet different stakeholders and it would broaden my knowledge, say about Islam and gender. This activity gave me confidence. My livelihood was working at something else altogether. I used to teach in college. I have taught at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad. But then my activism got me to travel and got me on boards of international organisations. In 2018, I managed to get funding for my own organisation and then I began to work on transgender law and developed contacts in the government. I joined the government because I thought that doing so can help implement the transgender law. I am UNDP's consultant to the government and am not on the government payroll. I work on other consultancies and I also still work with my own organisation.

Rehan: Thank you for laying out the story of your journey so clearly. Your pursuit of knowledge and then influence becomes one of wanting the community to progress and then the society at large. Was the feeling of helping others always with you?



Aisha: It was always a passion. As a teenager, I spent loads of time with my hijra culture. I loved them. I lived at home because I needed to continue my education. This was a dilemma of becoming a visible trans person. If you become visible you have to leave home, and if you leave your family you lose financial support. I knew that if I had to bring the change I had to be powerful which meant I needed to complete my education. I lived as a male while at home, though always feminine. This was my strategy: first, get an education. Education was a stepping-stone to getting respect. Respect is what I wanted. I got jobs as a financial manager and in teaching and I started my own non-profit and hired trans people. My NGO helps trans people get jobs in government and the private sector. I always hope that I can be an example to follow.

Rehan: Did you have mentors?

Aisha: Many. When I was young I was lucky to have Bubbli Malik as my guru, who was a leader with a very strong vision. She played a very important role in my activism. When I was studying at COMSATS Islamabad I had a number of very helpful professors. I have been lucky. My current boss Rabia Jhaveri Agha, the Federal Secretary for Human Rights, provided me with this opportunity with the government that helped me gain international attention. Pakistan became the first country in the world which had a transgender person as an official delegate to a United Nations body.

Rehan: Are there people or organisations outside Pakistan and in the region that have been inspirational to you? For example activists in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have been very intrigued by the transgender law that was passed in Pakistan and the activism around it.

Aisha: Definitely. I have been part of the international transgender movement since 2015 and have travelled and met a lot of amazing transgender leaders and activists from every country in the world! If I had to name someone it would be Mariam Molkara who brought about this change in Iran. She convinced Imam Khomeini on transgender issues so that he issued the fatwa to allow gender reassignment surgery. I admire her for bringing about tangible change.

Rehan: Thank you for your time. Any note you would like to end on?

Aisha: I'd like to say that it's all about wanting to be treated as a human being. That I not be boxed in and judged and always have to justify myself. That even as a transgender activist, I am a normal human being.