

# Sex in Pakistan

Contributed by Sarah Marian Seltzer  
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A new magazine is breaking down local taboos and entering the global feminist fray.

Kyla Pasha and Sarah Suhail have stirred up the blogosphere with the launch of Chay magazine — a publication about sex in Pakistani society, from a feminist and gender-inclusive perspective. “We at Chay magazine endeavor to bring to the Pakistani reading public a place to converse about those things we are most shy of,” reads the magazine’s mission statement. ITF chatted with Pasha about taboos, international feminism, and the reclaiming of pejorative words (“chay” is a polite euphemism for “chootia,” an equivalent to “cunt”).

Interviewer: Sarah Seltzer

Interviewee: Kyla Pasha

Tell me a little bit about the personal journey or set of beliefs that led you to found Chay. Has this been something you’ve wanted to do for a while?

Not as such. I’ve always wanted to have a magazine or a writing concern of some kind. I met Sarah Suhail about a year ago, and in the time that we’ve known each other, a lot of things have happened in Pakistan: there’s conflict around the sacking of the judiciary last year by the president; there have been media freedom issues and protests; the marriage between a transgender man and a woman was dissolved and reviled in the press.

Sarah introduced me to the protest circuit, and I found myself getting a little more politically active than I’d originally planned. A couple of months ago, we were having a conversation about what we thought was missing from public discourse. We came up with Chay.

How do you envision a magazine like this can change the public discourse in Pakistani communities? Does it come down to the fact that for women worldwide, the “personal is political”?

“Personal is political” informs a great deal of our approach here. We’re both products of feminist education in one way or another. But more than that, we realized when the Shamail and Shahzina case happened [the transgender man and his wife who were imprisoned] that Pakistani don’t have a way in which to talk about sex that is not derogatory, abusive, or silencing. Far from sex ed [sex education] in school or even the home, straight, young people aren’t even comfortable talking about being in relationships.

The perils of that kind of silence are great. We’re hoping that Chay will provide a platform on which people can talk about their experiences and concerns, and listen in to what others are saying.

Do you worry about being pigeonholed as either a fluffy women’s magazine or alternately, a radical feminist magazine?

We anticipate being pigeonholed as something sinful.

But you feel the power of your collective voices can help break down some of these notions of sin and taboo?

Can help, yes. "Help break down" is sort of the key here. It's an uphill battle at best, and we're aware of the unpopularity of the idea — we have been made aware by folks writing in and by conversations on other sites discussing Chay. Mostly, we'd just like to have the conversation.

Can you elaborate on some of the positive and negative responses you've been getting so far?

We've received a lot of encouraging responses from people who are interested in writing for us. They call it "a breath of fresh air" and just what was needed, which is very gratifying. We're particularly hearing from queer women and some queer men on how much they're looking forward to the forum.

We've had negative responses on the title of the magazine. The letter "chay" in Urdu stands for a curse word, chootia, which means something close to "dumb ass," but by calling it "cunty" "Chay" is used as a euphemism among polite folk who don't want to say the whole word, but mean it. We're reclaiming "chay" to mean all the things that we're supposedly not allowed to say. The negative feedback in one particular case was that we're not reclaiming it successfully and are being derogatory toward women.

In your mission statement, you note that while the magazine is primarily aimed at the Pakistani community, the online aspect will help bring you into the global feminist conversation as well.

That's the idea. We've been researching major feminist blogs as well as sexual and queer rights issues in our neighboring countries. India is particularly interesting in that regard, and we've had some contributions from there already.

As you research global feminism, does it frustrate you to continually see ignorant western journalists throw up their hands and moan about "where are the Muslim feminists"?

Firstly, if I got frustrated by ignorance in the media, of anywhere, I'd have died of [an] aneurism by now. Secondly, for me, the conversation is not really with people who can't see past the end of their noses.

There are a lot of people who say "Where are the Muslim feminists?" who haven't looked very hard. And there are a lot of people for whom feminism does not include veiling yourself voluntarily or taking your clothes off for Playboy if you want to, or exercising your choice and agency in other ways. If I start a conversation, invite everybody, and 10 people don't come because they think I'm not feminist enough, or Muslim enough, or straight enough, or gay enough, then they missed out.

For us, this is about conversations in Pakistan. Other people can talk about us as objects if they want, but it's of limited relevance. I'd rather they talked to us. But, you know &hellip;

What about western feminists, who can also be ignorant about global feminism? Do you hope that Chay can be part of a new movement to make the face of feminism more inclusive and worldwide?

The idea of inclusivity to me is a bit false. It suggests that I, as a Pakistani Muslim Feminist &mdash; which is not an identity I carry around all time, but just for the example &mdash; would like a seat at some bigger United Nations of Feminism table.

There's a table right here. There's a lot of us already sitting at it. Moreover, there are a bunch of other tables. And people wander from conversation to conversation. That's my ideal. There is, out there, a certain capital &ldquo;F&rdquo; feminism that has achieved that status because it's white-skinned and &ldquo;mainstream&rdquo; US. But it has that status from a particular privilege. It does not reflect everyone's reality.

Are you planning to be an online-only magazine, or are you going to have print issues as well?

For now, we're online-only. We'll see if there's a market for print in due course and maybe go into print as well.

You have a poetic and artistic background as well as a literary journalistic one, right? You're going to be publishing creative work as well as journalism?

Yeah, I'm a poet myself. And we're open to fiction, nonfiction, poetry &mdash; all kinds of work. Creative expression is cathartic and part of political work, so we didn't want to just do journalism and commentary.

Can you elaborate on how you think creative expression can help achieve political ends? Are there any examples of creative work that have inspired you politically, or political moments that have inspired you as a poet?

Visual art in the Pakistan in and since the '80s has been extremely political and feminist. It responded to the brutal dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq, who promulgated many misogynist and bigoted laws in the name of Islam. Many artists, mostly women, responded in their work, and it has served as one of the major avenues of empowerment and feminist expression in Pakistan.

So you're working within an established tradition?

Absolutely. That tradition has not touched on sexuality in quite the way we would like, but we are in no way reinventing the wheel here. We're taking our cue from our parents' generation.

Are there any articles in the first issue that you're particularly excited about?

There's an article about homoeroticism and masculinity in the public spaces of Lahore that I'm excited about. There's some great poetry and artwork. And there's an article in the pipeline about sex work and HIV [the AIDS virus]. It's going to be fantastic. I'm totally psyched.

Do you think it's difficult for people to see a magazine about sex as informative rather than titillating?

I think it might be. It's definitely a danger. But I'm confident that we'll clear the bar with room to spare. Again, if someone looks at it, sees that we're talking about sexual rights and marginalization, education, and the law, and still feels we're here to titillate, then we're not sitting at the same table. That's fine, so long as no one throws stuff at us over it.