

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Why Toilets are About Class and Gender Wars with Introduction

by Sohaila Abdulali



PROFESSOR GHAZAL ZULFIQAR (SECOND FROM THE RIGHT) WITH HER STUDENTS OUTSIDE THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN AFTER THEY MADE THEIR PRESENTATION TO THE COMMISSION. AT THE EXTREME RIGHT IS RUBINA, ZULFIQAR'S OWN DOMESTIC WORKER, TOILET CLEANER, AND CLOSE FRIEND.

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

by Michael Bennett

We are republishing the following article by Sohaila Abdulali, with the author's permission. The article was brought to our attention by *Radical Teacher* founding board member Louis Kampf who ran across it on [livemint.com](http://www.livemint.com), where it was first published (<http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/38Jqn3MImrOPK04C1Uw5hN/How-toilets-are-a-flashpoint-for-gender-wars.html>). Thank you to Louis for spotting the article, Livemint.com for publishing it in the first place, Professor Ghazal Zulfiqar for sharing her experiences and the accompanying images, and especially to Sohaila Abdulali and Livemint.com for allowing us to republish it.

By way of introduction, we wanted to explain what it was that appealed to us about "Why Toilets are About Class and Gender Wars." There are several reasons we thought that the essay was well-suited for *Radical Teacher*, from the engaging narrative about a course taught at a Pakistani university to the larger issues that the essay raises for teachers and students in any and all educational institutions, and beyond.

Most of the essay is drawn from an interview that Sohaila Abdulali conducted with Professor Ghazal Zulfiqar concerning a class she taught on "Women and Policy in Pakistan" at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). Zulfiqar and her students focused in part on "the toilet as a political sphere," which became the topic of a presentation that they made to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Based on the description provided by Abdulali, this unit of Zulfiqar's course sounds like an ideal model of radical teaching in action.

First, Zulfiqar asked her students to consider an aspect of academic labor that is often overlooked: the poorly paid service-level jobs that are crucial to the functioning of any school. In particular, students were asked to focus on the undercompensated labor of toilet cleaners at their university. Next, Zulfiqar asked her students to unpack their own unexamined relationship to the toilet cleaners at home and in school, causing them to have the "disconcerting experience" of recognizing their own participation in exploitation. She asked the students to think about the role of gender, class, and race in their relationships with toilet cleaners. Students then engaged with toilet cleaners, interviewing them about themselves and their work. Finally, the professor and her students presented the results of their research to an audience beyond the university (a Human Rights organization), in hopes of bringing about changes to curb the exploitation of toilet cleaners.

The ways in which Zulfiqar had her students engage the topic of "toilet wars" is a model of radical teaching in terms of both the content and the form of the lesson. In terms of content, the course asks students to think about the socioeconomics of higher education through the same lenses we describe on the masthead of *Radical Teacher* as

a "socialist, feminist, and anti-racist journal on the theory and practice of teaching." In terms of form, Zulfiqar engages her students to think critically, including self-criticism of their own position in an exploitative system. Students were asked to not just passively read about and discuss an issue in the abstract, but to engage the issue directly through writing about their experiences, interviewing toilet workers about their experiences, and ultimately presenting the results of their research to a larger political entity, making an active intervention in civil society. This class would have been decidedly less radical had it not asked students to examine their own subject positions within the university, while encouraging them to make political interventions in the institutions of which they are a part.

In a subsequent email communication on 7 January 2017, Professor Zulfiqar reported that many of her students are still actively pursuing the projects they began in her class. Some of them continued working with Zulfiqar on her research as part of their senior projects. She added that even "those that have graduated continue to knock on my office door from time to time to ask if they can participate in some way for they know that I am still working on this issue." Zulfiqar continued to teach a version of the same course, which also encourages students to participate in policymaking. In fact, she adds that she and her students may be able to extend the reach of their project "since the provincial government is considering a domestic worker bill and has expressed interest in learning about the findings of our small study." This is another encouraging example of a radical teacher continuing to fight the good fight.

In addition to presenting an interesting and important narrative about Zulfiqar's class at LUMS, Abdulali points out that toilets are "flashpoints for culture and gender wars everywhere, from transgender bathrooms in the US to some public toilets in India where women have to pay but men don't." Abdulali notes that the disproportionately greater number of cellphones than public toilets in Pakistan and India means that it's easier to have "private chats than it is to have private shits" throughout most of South Asia. Thus toilets are symbols of larger culture wars over gender and class.

In extending Abdulali's analysis to the contexts with which I am most familiar, it's interesting to consider why toilets are also about class and gender wars in the United States. Bathrooms were, of course, a major site of racial segregation in the Jim Crow South and in apartheid-era South Africa. In both instances, photographs of "white" and "colored" signs for restrooms are iconic representations of racial oppression. More recently, the furor around the North Carolina "bathroom bill" showed that gender wars over toilets are ongoing in the U.S. Interestingly, propaganda for the North Carolina bill portrayed trans people (specifically trans women) as perpetrators of violence rather than, as they almost always are, victims of it. It seems that toilets are still flashpoints for struggles against, racism, classism, homophobia, and misogyny.

Focusing on a more recent example from the teaching environment I know best, the university where I taught for twenty-two years before my retirement last year, let's consider labor relations at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus. The University's lockout of all faculty in anticipation of a possible strike, brought national and even international media attention to LIU's application of a classic management tool for factory owners (the lockout) to the business of higher education. Many commentators focused on this unprecedented move by the administration as the latest evidence of the thoroughgoing corporatization of higher education in the U.S. Which it surely was.

However, what didn't get as much media attention was that the LIU Faculty Federation (LIUFF of the AFT/AFL-CIO) was but one of five unions under fire by management at the Brooklyn campus. In addition to the teacher's union (representing adjunct and tenure-stream faculty), the unions representing clerical workers, campus security, campus engineering, and janitorial staff (whose work includes toilet cleaning) were also under assault. Two of these unions are working without contracts (clerical workers and campus engineering), as are the faculty after a contract stalemate led to ongoing arbitration; two of the unions have been replaced by outsourcing (though some of the same workers have been hired back at lower salaries and with lesser benefits). In short, unionbusting is alive and well at LIU's Brooklyn Campus, and it is not the only place in the U.S. where such practices are increasingly common and in need of contestation and resistance.

Abdulali's essay also does a nice job of showing that race, class, and gender are best studied not as independent variables but as intersectional vectors of analysis. In critically assessing the socio-economics of higher education, or for that matter any discursive practices or political systems, radical teachers employ critical analysis that blends feminism, socialism, and anti-racism. In the case of toilet cleaners in Pakistan, Prof. Zulfiqar commented that "You think of feminism as a male-female binary. But if you ask a maid, her biggest fear is not a man, but her *begum* [woman of high rank,

mistress], who can do anything to her." In this particular instance, by factoring race and class into the equation, we find that women are being exploited moreso by women than by men. Upper-class women from privileged racial and caste categories are exploiting working-class women from other racial and caste categories, so this individual mistreatment is best understood as part of a larger exploitative system. A clear example of why *Radical Teacher* is interested in essays that come from the perspective of anti-racist socialist feminism and not classic liberal feminism.

In the U.S., one need only turn to the recent presidential election to see evidence of the need for the intersectional analysis employed by Abdulali and Zulfiqar. Many commentators were sure that Trump could not overcome the gender gap to have any shot of winning. What these commentators failed to account for was how gender is imbricated with class and race. Though women of color resoundingly rejected Trump, he received slightly over half of the votes cast by white women. White privilege continues to "trump" other factors for many European Americans who seem to vote against their gender and class interests to hold on to a supposedly kinder, gentler form of White Power (a specter raised none-too-subtly by the slogan "Make America Great Again"). For me, one of the most telling images of the election was a photo of a white woman at a Trump rally wearing a t-shirt proclaiming "Trump can grab me by the ↓."

Returning to the immediate concerns of Abdulali's essay, she does a wonderful job in relatively few words of applying such intersectional analysis to classroom teaching and the contexts within which we all teach. We were struck by how Abdulali's essay on toilet cleaners at a Pakistani university fits with the specific and larger concerns that will be the focus of *Radical Teacher's* next issue on "Critical University Studies." The essay republished below, and the upcoming issue of *RT*, remind us that it's not sufficient for radical teachers to do innovative work in the classroom without considering the contexts within which that teaching occurs.



LAHORE UNIVERSITY OF MANAGEMENT SCIENCES LOGO

## Why Toilets are About Class and Gender Wars<sup>2</sup>

The Lahore University of Management Sciences is pricey and selective. Set in the heart of feudal Punjab, it educates the daughters and sons of Pakistan's most privileged citizens, getting them ready to move on to Harvard, Princeton and the like, and take their rightful places on the thrones of power. This semester, students in Ghazal Zulfiqar's Women and Policy in Pakistan course are concentrating on a different kind of throne—the porcelain one in the bathroom—and the women who clean it.

Zulfiqar and her students presented their research on "(De)composing The Toilet As A Political Sphere" at the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan a few days ago. The students catalogued dismal conditions and advocated policy guidelines for toilet cleaners, both domestic and those who work in institutional and public spaces. They don't know if their presentation will have any impact on policy. It certainly had an impact on their own lives and thoughts. Here is some of what they wrote:

*"... made me realize my own privilege regarding bathrooms in a way that I haven't reckoned with before and it is a disconcerting experience."*

*"... to my family the whole village is like the servant quarters."*

*"I've never even cleaned my own bathroom and I wouldn't know where to begin."*

Zulfiqar, originally from Karachi, moved to the United States in 2000 and returned 14 years later for her teaching job in Lahore. "I got a huge culture shock," she told me. She saw "a huge disconnect with the population of the country" in both students and professors. "I live on campus, watching professors' wives deal with their *ayahs* [maids]. Lahore has a distinct feudal culture—many women think nothing about slapping and hitting their servants. Newspapers often report stories of under-age servants being tortured and killed. You think of feminism as a male-female binary. But if you ask a maid, her biggest fear is not a man, but her *begum* [woman of high rank, mistress], who can do anything to her."

Her course prospectus stated: "The toilet represents the dirtiest of domestic work, the type of work that is beneath the dignity of any self-respecting Pakistani, whether man or woman. Most of us have never cleaned a toilet, not our own and certainly not someone else's. But our toilets get cleaned several times a week, by people whose job it is to clean out our most despicable mess. This makes for a very interesting political space—a space with

two sets of actors: the makers of the mess, who are not prepared to clean it, and the cleaners of the space, who are not usually allowed to use it. The toilet then is a site where class, income and racial inequalities are made dramatically clear. Gender, of course, is a key feature of this high drama because the job is segregated according to the rules of private and public space as well as the cultural norms of decorum."

"I've become really obsessed with toilets," Zulfiqar told me. "In airports and restaurants, I spend a lot of time talking to the women who clean. These women spend their entire working lives in the toilets. Sometimes my husband will text me: 'The food is here, when are you coming out?'"

She asked her students: "What are the bathrooms like in the spaces that you own or use? Do you know where the people that clean your bathrooms relieve themselves?" The students found themselves, sometimes for the first time, talking to the women who cleaned their bathrooms, learning about their lives and facing up to their own discomforts and blindspots.

"A couple of female students came to me privately and said they sometimes clean their own bathrooms, but are embarrassed to tell anyone. Toilets are a huge stigma across class," she told me.

Of course, we Indians know this very well. Toilets are flashpoints for culture and gender wars everywhere, from transgender bathrooms in the US to some public toilets in



PUBLIC TOILET IN PAKISTAN

India where women have to pay but men don't. Neither India nor Pakistan have ratified the ILO (International Labour Organization) Convention 189 setting labour standards for domestic workers. Both countries share the shame of not enough toilets: 53% of Indians and 21% of Pakistanis have no access to a toilet. You've probably seen the dramatic numbers showing that South Asians have more mobile phones than bathrooms. It's easier to have private chats than it is to have private shits.

Zulfiqar's students soon shared her fascination with toilet culture. "They were shocked by the lives and stories

and suffering and everything they never knew," she told me. They interviewed 42 women. The majority was Muslim, but a sizeable percentage was Christian. Fifty-seven percent of them were from rural areas. At least 38% were the main breadwinners in their families. Most had children to support. One student's family employed girls of 8 and 9 and paid them no wages at all—just a promise to pay their dowry one day.

They found that women who work in private households are much more vulnerable to harassment and exploitation than those who work in hotels, restaurants, and airports. They found that their mothers replace the soap if a servant touches it. Or they simply replace the servant. They found that across the board, toilet cleaners are considered cunning and untrustworthy (a quarter of the interviewees had been accused of theft), deserving only of scorn and stale *chapatis* [bread]. They found humanity where they had not seen it before and began to question their own roles in a cruel class system.

"The students are waking up," Zulfiqar said.

Dear lucky *Mint Lounge* reader, do you know your maid's story? Would the world end if you and she sat on the same toilet? Or if you deployed the brush and cleaned it yourself?

## Notes:

1. Sohaila Abdulali's article, "Why Toilets are About Class and Gender Wars" has been reprinted with permission from the publisher, HT Media Ltd and can be found in its original format at <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/38Jqn3MImrOPK04C1Uw5hN/How-toilets-are-a-flashpoint-for-gender-wars.html>. The reprinted article on pages 55-56 is copyrighted to HT Media Ltd and they reserve all rights. The introduction to this article by Michael Bennett is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.
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