

Women's Action Forum (WAF) Lahore is aghast at the content of Clause 2 of The Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (Amendment) Bill 2020, passed unanimously by the Punjab Provincial Assembly, that states, *"Any textbook or curriculum ... including Islamiyat, urge History, Pakistan Studies, Urdu, Literature or any other subject material related to religion shall not be published before taking prior approval from the Muttahida Ulema Board Punjab and the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board shall be bound to take such approval from the Muttahida Ulema Board Punjab"*.

By granting the power to a body, no matter how well intentioned, that lacks the specialized knowledge required for the task of vetting the content of different subjects taught at school, this Bill subverts the very purpose of education which is to build students' knowledge base and facilitate cognitive growth and critical thinking skills through engagement with different forms of information, ideas and points of view.

Coming in tandem with the decision by the Vice Chancellors of Punjab's institutions of higher education led, on his own admission, by the Vice Chancellor of Government College University to make reading of the Quran mandatory for all students and the Punjab Assembly's consideration of a law to ban all books that are not in sync with the teachings of Islam, these august bodies have in one swoop violated the people's fundamental right to freedom of thought, expression and belief including the right of Pakistan's children and young adults to a meaningful education that can enable them to meet the challenges of today's world.

WAF asks the honourable members of the Punjab Provincial Assembly, if they have, as elected representatives of the people consulted concerned educationists responsible for future of our younger generations, reflected on the substance, implications and impact of their decisions? Will science and geography books now fly in the face of scientific knowledge and inform students that the sun revolves around the earth as stated by one Maulana in his YouTube lecture?

Have our educationists considered that compulsory reading of the Quran for all students, violates the right of non-Muslim citizens to freedom of faith and belief? Have the honourable members of the Punjab Assembly led by Chaudhry Pervez Illahi and Khadeeja Umer considered that by banning all books that they feel out of sync with their understanding of Islam, they are violating the people's right to knowledge and information? Have they thought of the long term implications of expunging all knowledge that does not come within the purview of the Muttahida Ulema Board's concerns and does not fit in with the Board's understanding of Islam? Are they willing that the knowledge base of our students be reduced to a single dimension and they be taught to revile, demean and debase other religions and serve as a threat to the non-Muslim citizens

of Pakistan? The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) gave the injunction to all Muslims to seek knowledge from diverse sources and in regions as far away and different from Islamic culture as China. Do members of the Punjab Assembly, who unanimously passed this Bill and supported the banning of books, believe that their decisions are in line with this injunction?

The education system in Pakistan needs to be improved and brought in line with the needs of a modern nation facing the very considerable challenges of today's world. It should not be used as a tool to promote obscurantism and push the younger generation back into ignorance and misinformation. We need to open the doors to all knowledge not shut them in the face of our children.

WAF demands that the honourable Governor of the Punjab to review the Bill to grant text book vetting powers to the Muttahida Ulema Board Punjab. There seems no reason to have an oversight body over an institution (Text Book Board) already tasked with developing appropriate texts. While religion is already a significant part of our curriculum it needs to be remembered that Pakistan is a pluralist, multi religious society and they are duty bound to honour and maintain people's right to freedom of thought and belief and not trample it underfoot.