

# The story of a woman

*Woman education 2-3-03* By Themrise Khan

**T**HE state education system in Pakistan never ceases to amaze one with its bizarre twists and turns. Cases abound which illustrate just how deeply entrenched the apathy and helplessness is within the state system. But the entire fault cannot be put on just the system itself. As one delves deeper into the culture and psyche of rural Pakistan in particular, one realizes that it is more than just an under-funded or decaying school system in a functional sense that is the real problem. It is a decaying sense of social values, traditions and norms that are actually playing a large part in the degradation of education in the country. The following incident is an example of such decay.

It was a routine visit to one of the girl's schools of the local village in Upper Sindh. It was a two roomed primary school housed in the compound of the local girls high school. The teachers were as always, expressing their woes to my colleagues and myself. Enrollment was exceptionally high in this school, which was in itself very reassuring, but space was a limiting factor. The rooms just weren't large enough. One of the teachers pointed out that the high school had two rooms that were lying empty, because there weren't enough students.

"Why don't you request the principal if you could use one of the rooms for your children", we inquired. The two teachers looked hesitantly at one another. It knew it couldn't be as simple as that, so we probed further.

The story was this. The principal of the high school was actually not the principal. She was the "female companion" of the local wadera, who had managed to get her the position through his contacts, to keep her occu-

pied. She kept the two rooms locked for her own 'use'. "We have tried talking to her, but she is a horrible woman and threatens that she will have us all thrown out", said one of the teachers. "She never even comes to teach, said the other, "we have to cover for her half the time".

As we were leaving the

snapped.

I introduced us and dived into the objectives of our school improvement plan. "Perhaps you could consider releasing one of your unused rooms for the primary school? I could get the necessary approvals for you from the DEO, if you like?"

"How dare you!", she charged. "These are my rooms



school, who should stride in, but the 'lady' herself. I suppose that was a time as good as any to give it a try, so I plucked up the courage to approach her. I say courage because of the daggers-drawn look she gave us as she sauntered by. Both the teachers refused to have any part of it and I didn't blame them either. I politely entered her classroom and asked if we could have a word. She snarled back — and I do not exaggerate here. Her heavy gold jewelry shone brightly as did the yellow gota and tassels of her dupatta. She stared at us fixedly in the eye.

"What do you want?" she

and I will do with them whatever I want. Do you know who I am?" she went on unabated.

I was tempted to answer, but held my tongue. "Actually, this is a government school and comes under the jurisdiction of the department of education, and it is they who allocate rooms and responsibility, so I don't think you can lay any personal claim to this property". My team members looked on confused. The two teachers cowered outside the door and the students watched in fear and amusement.

Then, all hell broke loose.

Like an injured bull, she