
Meet Zahida Kazmi: Pakistan's First Female Taxi Driver

She is fearless. That was my first thought when Zahida Kazmi started telling me her story about how she became Pakistan's first female taxi driver. Zahida Kazmi, a 64 years old widow and a mother of seven children, drives a taxi in Rawalpindi since the past 37 years. Becoming the first taxi driver of Pakistan was not an easy path for Kazmi. Her husband left her nothing but poverty when he died. 'I belong to an area (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) where women are killed if they step out of their home.'

Kazmi initially started driving a yellow cab from Rawalpindi to Islamabad airport every day to pick up passengers. She used to keep a gun with her for her own protection and wore a veil (Burqa) to avoid any untoward incidents. However, the brave lady soon discarded these protections. 'I realized, my attire would scare off the passengers so I carried a dupatta to cover my head instead,' she tells me. When a woman becomes a widow, she feels as if the protective veil from her head has been removed and the status of vulnerable has been thrust upon her.

In our society, widows are often faced with two choices: poverty or dependency. Low-income women, who do not possess any financial assets, suffer a lot. Such women can be exploited by the strong male culture, especially in rural areas. They are also victims of social and cultural prejudices and abuse. Kazmi, despite social and financial pressures, became an inspiration for women across Pakistan. 'I am rebellious,' she says with a smirk. Her joyous determination is clearly visible on her weather-beaten face. 'I fought for my children. My resistance worked for their benefit; they became stable. Despite the fact that I might get killed, I stepped out to work so that I could feed them.'

In her area, Kazmi is popularly known as 'Roshni ka Minar'- a beacon of hope. After becoming a widow, her children became her only concern. She wanted to give them a good life and a great education. However, with the passage of time, her sons estranged her. Kazmi now lives alone with a teenage daughter. 'Eventually, it became difficult for me to drive all the time but what can I do? My sons don't help.'

Despite every obstacle life threw onto her path, Kazmi has proved to our society that a woman can do anything she aims at, no matter how difficult the situation or how frightening the road. 'Even today, I don't have my own car. I drive a rented one and earn 15,000 from it- which is quite low.' She says it tough for her to survive with the low earnings but she manages anyhow. 'I don't like to beg or ask favors. I have never asked for financial support from anyone. I will earn with respect till I am alive.'

Kazmi's career is built in a male-dominated world. She challenges the widely accepted stereotype that women are bad drivers. 'No other woman was in the driving profession before I stepped into this field. As a driver, I am very sensible. I drive carefully. I am a better driver than most of the men on the road. I can even manage all the mechanical issues of the car. I don't require any other person's help.' Initially, people were unreceptive and questioned Kazmi about her choice of profession. However, they soon became used to a woman driving them around. She says many passengers now appreciate her for what she does, some people even call her 'mother'.

A bright and positive person Zahid Kazmi has only one worry: how women depict themselves before men. 'Women should be more empowered. They are not weaker than men. Women think they don't have enough strength. That is not true. A woman in our society works, she comes home, raises children, cooks, looks after her house. She is a multi-tasking talented person. It's just she should never lose hope.' Presently, thousands of women have become drivers across Pakistan despite facing constant harassment thanks to Zahida Kazmi's courage. The first step is all it takes to change the world.

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