

Saadat Munir

# Aks International Minorities Festival at the YEAR OF THE WOMEN\*



Aks International Minorities Festival, Film – Art – Dialogue was established in 2014 in Pakistan by a group of Pakistani and diasporic activists, seeking to improve the representation of queer and trans\* people of colour. Aks Festival screens films, accompanied by discussions and debates, and organises educational workshops, art exhibitions and performing arts events that promote awareness and dialogue about issues impacting minorities and marginalised groups. The festival has taken place annually in Pakistan, across three of its biggest cities (Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad) and hosted some additional single screening events in the neighbouring cities, with a focus on minorities and marginalized groups in the country. Among these was our specific focus on indigenous Khwaja Sira (transgender) communities.

Since 2015, Aks International Minorities Festival has also held an annual festival in Copenhagen, bringing to focus the lives of queer minorities through a unique combination of film, workshops, art exhibitions and performances. In 2017, Aks Festival started its new chapter in Manchester in collaboration with local queer, trans\* and People of Color organisations and activists.

“Aks” is an Urdu/Persian word, which means reflection. The basic idea of Aks International Minorities Festival is to draw reflections through the films, art and dialogues produced by under-represented groups by providing cultural and political platforms where they can be seen and heard. Aks Festival engages its audience in a way that challenges them to empathise and demand justice for minorities and marginalised communities. It is a non-profit and politically independent organisation that prefers to work on the grassroots level and encourage local community members to contribute in whatever way they see fit.

Aks Festival is the first of its kind in Pakistan, creating space for dialogue to bridge the gap between minorities and mainstream society. The festival has played an important role in LGBTQIA+ community building and in providing safer spaces for minorities to

create dialogue and demand justice. Over the past 4 years, Aks Festival has managed to bring peaceful dialogue about minorities’ rights to public universities and institutions across Pakistan. The festival has produced and supported artists from the margins, who may otherwise not have found space to showcase their talents.

This very diverse film and art program helps in bringing forth global human rights issues to festival audiences. The festival stands alone in being the most far-reaching and inclusive festival in Pakistan.

Globally, Aks International Minorities Festival always seeks platforms to create visibility for queer and transgender minorities. Continuing in this line, Aks Festival collaborated with Schwules Museum and TransFormations - Trans\* Film Festival Berlin in 2018 to organise an exhibition of films and art produced by Pakistani and diasporic artists and activists. The idea of this exhibition was to create a mirror image of the Aks Festival in Pakistan as part of the 12 Moons Film Lounge at Schwules Museum for the YEAR OF THE WOMEN\* program.

The exhibition represented alternative interpretations along the spectrums of gender and sexuality. It allowed us to create dialogue about authentic queer and indigenous transgender culture and its existence in the global south, and allowed us to showcase art and films that complimented and furthered the dialogue of diversity among the queer and trans\* cultures around the world. This exhibition exposed the museum audience to new ideas and methodologies for assessing queer and transgender representations, which differ greatly from the traditional western LGBTQIA+ framework. Furthermore, it also allowed them to see how films and art can contribute to promoting human rights, creating visibility and building bridges between minorities and the mainstream society of a country like Pakistan. We also exhibited “Ladies of Lahore,” a photo series by diasporic artist, Nadia Narejo, that was taken in Pakistan during Aks Festival in 2016.

Since we are a community based festival, it is our topmost priority to be as inclusive as possible. This is why we try to provide facilities that can allow people to feel comfortable and be however they want to be. In the exhibition at Schwules Museum, for example, we showed a representation of our dressing room with items we brought from Pakistan, such as make-up and gowns. Our community can change clothing at our festival for their personal safety. In Pakistan, we provide bus shuttles so that people can arrive safely to our festival and home.

Recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, initiated a much more intimate series of events where we allowed our audiences to host home screenings with their friends to ensure that safety measures were implemented. These home screenings were very different from what we call digital screenings in the western world. We designed them mainly to help minimise depression and drug abuse, and as a simple offering to LGBTQIA+ people living in isolation during COVID. We have also organised outdoor picnics in parks, in smaller groups, and some other activities in the past two years.

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