

## Steps Towards Gender Fairness and Women's Empowerment in Pakistan

Muhammad SAJJAD (Pakistan)

According to the 6<sup>th</sup> Population and Housing Census 2017 Report, female population in Pakistan constitutes 48.76% of the total population. Currently, Pakistan is the world's fifth most populous country and the second most populous in South Asia. For this huge part of population, Pakistan is working in tandem with national and international NGOs to properly translate, monitor and report on the implementation of gender equality and women's empowerment commitments as mentioned in Goal 5 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. With less than 12 years to achieve these targets, the UN Women Pakistan formulated its new five-year plan (2018-2022). Its main aim is to improve the gender responsive plans, policies and systems of governance with institutions being more accessible to and delivering equally for women and girls. Also, its objectives include providing a safe environment where women and girls can live free from violence in private and public spaces, and enabling them to access quality essential services. For the purpose of building an inclusive democracy in Pakistan, women leaders, transgender activists, representatives of religious minorities and persons with special needs are encouraged to participate in politics with all citizens.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2017 issued by the World Economic Forum, Pakistan is ranked second from the bottom among 144 countries, and is also ranked 150<sup>th</sup> out of 152 countries in "Women, Peace and Security Index 2017/18" released by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security in 2017. To overcome these gaps, Pakistan started Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) to uplift the livelihood of poor and low-income women. Until now, 7.7 million beneficiaries have been registered in this program. Similarly, to provide public transport facilities, some provincial authorities have started designating separate buses (pink) and reserved seats in general transport for ladies. Also, to secure women's rights to inherit from their parents and spouses, some provincial governments have adopted special rules.

As a major step towards women's empowerment, Pakistan's National Assembly passed the Elections Act in October 2017. In this act, the following clauses stipulate special measures for women's empowerment:

- a. To increase the participation of women in the election process, it is mandatory for every political party to give 5 % tickets to women.
- b. If in any constituency the votes cast by women account for less than 10 % of all the votes, then the election results of such constituency or polling station could be suspended.

According to a statement by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), nearly 9.13 million women voters have been registered before the election in 2018. It is a step forward in women's long battle for their rights in Pakistan—though it does little to address the gender imbalance in the 2013 elections, in which male registered voters outnumbered female ones by some 11 million. A number of NGOs and INGOs advocated women's participation in the elections 2018 held in Pakistan with the support of ECP, in which women not only cast their votes but were also aware of their rights to contest in the election and become future leaders. As a result, in this general election, 464 women contested seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies, of those 175 women contested as independent candidates and 289 women on political party tickets.

Some other commitments in place include National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women, Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the name or pretext of honour) Act, Acid and Burn Crime Bill 2017, Criminal Law (Offences relating to rape) and National Plan of Action on Human Rights. Other commitments adopted include Gender Equality Policy Frameworks, and Women’s Empowerment Packages and Initiatives.

Historically, Pakistan has produced a number of great women leaders and role models. The most prominent among them is the mother of the nation, Mohtarma (meaning “Respected Lady”) Fatima Jinnah—a dental surgeon, biographer, stateswoman, and an iconic figure to whom Pakistani women aspire. There is also the first (and twice-elected) female Prime Minister of the country, and a mentor, Shaheed (meaning “martyred”) Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, who is an inspiration to women not only in Pakistan but across the globe. But in praising the tenacity, perseverance and leadership of these women, it is often forgotten that they had to make incredible sacrifices, and face daunting challenges to achieve accomplishments that would come far easier to men in this country in general. In most matters, men in Pakistan subject women to cultural biases and relegate them to age-old stereotypes. Yet they forget the example of their Islamic mother, Hazrat Khadija (RA), who was the first feminist professing the state religion of Pakistan. Born more than 1,400 years ago, she was a successful businesswoman and exemplary wife, and traded with men.

To find solutions for Pakistani women, importance should be placed not only on promulgating gender mainstreaming laws and policies but on changing the attitudes of every member of society who must support women to become equals in generating economic activities.

