

Equality for Women is Progress for All

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Gender equality remains the biggest global challenge of the 21st century. Despite a global discourse on gender equality and a number of international conventions and commitments on women's rights, there is hardly any country in the world that can truly claim to have achieved gender egalitarianism. Gender gaps in social, economic and political status persist over the world. The slogan 'Equality for Women is Progress for All' has yet to be fully understood by the male-dominant world, especially Asia.

In Pakistan, the gender equality discourse is engulfed by controversies and has no impact on ground. The extremist lobby and the male-dominant elite assign women to a subordinated status vis-a-vis men and rule over the whole society. A misogynist mind-set continues to prevail. Women are denied of the fundamental right to live as individuals in the patriarchal society. Furthermore, to maintain this patriarchal control over the lives and bodies of women, the mechanism of violence against them is invoked on a daily basis and we can see it in daily routines. They are raped, abused, harassed, humiliated, and their rights are denied by their families, communities and state institutions.

Today, our politicians are making tall claims about their commitment to women's empowerment. They will try to blur the reality of gender disparities in social life. It is hard for our policymakers and the people's representatives to explain the stark gender disparities that exist in all spheres of life. Despite national commitment to gender equality, Pakistan has slid down on the Global Gender Gap Index from the 132nd to the 135th, second only to Yemen. There is a persistent gender gap in the literacy rate: 49 per cent of women are literate compared with 65 per cent of men. Pakistani women have the worst health status in the world, with the highest maternal mortality rate of 260 women dying per 100,000 live births.

There is also a gender gap in political participation and representation of women as voters, candidates and representatives. Presently there is not a single woman minister in the federal government. Seventy-six women sit in the National Assembly, out of which 60 are the reserved seats. The provision for 33 per cent representation of women in local governments has been made in all provincial local government acts. Only 18 per cent of women work in the formal sector of the economy, whereas 70 per cent labour in the informal sector consists of women, which is three times larger than in the formal economy.

Only 11 per cent of women own property and four per cent own agricultural land.

Women are the single largest group whose fundamental rights are systematically threatened by the state and society. The dual system of patriarchy and capitalism positions them as second class citizens legally and socially. This leads to a low investment in their human capital by the family and the state, and creates the basis for gender disparities.

Every third woman is subjected to some form of violence. Discriminatory laws, honour killings and the traditions such as ofvani, swara, karo-kari, sung chatti, walvar and watta satta are creating havoc in women's lives. In the face of rising extremism, women have been targeted and killed by extremists.

Within this larger context of social inequalities, we need to raise fundamental questions on International Women's Day rather than listening to the hollow reiteration of commitment to gender equality. The important question we should ask today is whether the goal of gender equality can possibly be achieved in a society, whose social and economic structures are based on social and gender inequalities.

Women's weak socio-economic position makes them vulnerable to all forms of violence. Domestic violence is rampant, women are killed in the name of tradition and honour, and are even bought and exchanged to settle family disputes. This culture of impunity makes the country one of the most dangerous places to live in for women. Rising conservatism in society further endangers women's rights of mobility, working and participating in political processes. They are attacked by radicals for seeking education and employment.

We must understand that gender equality is not a set of commitments reflected in legal and policy documents. Gender equality is a terrain of social, cultural and legal struggles that cannot be won without changing the larger social and economic structures of society.



Domestic violence



Large number of girls in Pakistan are out of school



Pakistan-violence-termed-main-cause-of-suicide-among-chitral-women



Women in Pakistan are active in politics after so many years