

Pakistan: Working for women empowerment

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Prime Minister Imran Khan's speech to the nation was far less impressive than his first speech that was delivered after the election. It omitted the mention of women, transgender and religious minorities.

The newly-elected government needs to realise that with the exclusion of nearly half of the female population (48.67%), they will not be able to achieve a single development target that they have set for their government. The only reference to women as widows in a charity-oriented approach in Khan's speech is a matter of grave concern to women's rights movement in the country.

Pakistan is one of the few countries where the sex ratio is inverse (105 men per 100 women) as opposed to the world average. Gender biases leading to higher female infant mortality rate, early marriages, repeated pregnancies, lack of pre-and post-natal care resulting in the highest maternal mortality rate (as rightly mentioned by Khan) and gender-based violence negatively impact the life chances of women in Pakistan. Pakistan ranks the second last on the Global Gender Gap Index 2017.

Gender equality is not only the intrinsic right of women, it is also a smart economic choice. Higher status of women is a multiplier with domino effects on every other development priority of the country. If Mr Khan is seriously committed to uplifting the status of women, below are some of the recommendations that have no financial implications and will help achieve tangible results in human development goals:

There is a wide gender gap in early education whereas none in higher education. The government should instruct education departments to undertake gender analysis of the education sector followed by gender budgeting. Education departments in consultation with provincial governments should set annual targets to bridge gender gap at the primary and secondary education levels.

Mr PM talked about the stunted growth of our children. One of the reasons for stunted growth is that 40% women in reproductive age have iron deficiency. Gender discrimination in intra-household food distribution results in malnourished mothers. We need to invest in women's health to have healthy children.

Another serious challenge is the fast-growing population of Pakistan. Research studies show that there is 24% unmet family planning needs. Health/family planning departments should target areas where people are willing to use contraceptives and ensure their easy access to family planning methods. This will save women from unwanted pregnancies and unsafe illegal abortions.

With regard to women's economic empowerment, the vast majority of women work in the informal sector of the economy. Following three actions will go a long way in women's economic empowerment (i) The government should instruct all public-sector institutions to fulfil 10% gender quota across pay scale, which is a legal requirement. (ii) Labour departments should be instructed to ensure that in small factories where 5-10 women are working, employers must pay them minimum wage (iii) Revenue departments should be directed for automatic transfer of inheritance of women in their names. The cultural practice of women relinquishing their inheritance rights in favour of male

heirs of deceased is already declared illegal by the superior judiciary in Pakistan.

In the absence of a level-playing field for women in politics, affirmative action measures in the shape of reservation of seats for women in the local, national and provincial assemblies and Senate are already in place. It is recommended that indirect modality of election on reserved seats must be changed to direct elections on reserved seats. The government should also introduce an amendment to the Political Parties Act to make it mandatory for political parties to bring certain percentage of women in political parties' internal decision-making structures.

Women in Pakistan suffer from multiple direct and structural forms of violence. Pakistan has been declared internationally one of the three most dangerous countries for women. The government should specify one of the existing courts in each district to exclusively deal with such cases and a time frame should be specified to dispose them of.

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P.S.

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