**The missing rights of the child**

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Children constitute 50 percent of Pakistan’s population but remain the most neglected segment of our society. Because they cannot vote, political parties do not promise to do much for them in their manifestos, and do even far less when in power. Hence, it is not surprising that manifestos of parties which participated in the elections said very little about child rights.

Out of all the major political parties, the PPP was the first to unveil its manifesto. The party’s manifesto made promises about education, health, water and sanitation, differently-abled children, food and nutrition and sports. A separate section was devoted to child rights, which was missing in other parties’ manifestos.

The PPP vowed to enact laws on issues concerning child protection and welfare, internal trafficking, prohibiting child labour, child marriages and acid and burn crimes. The party also made a commitment to ensure implementation of the current laws on child rights.

The PPP promised to increase the education budget to five percent of GDP by 2025. A shift from rote learning to teaching styles which promote creativity among children was also proposed. Emphasis was laid on girls’ education, eliminating geographical inequalities, curriculum reforms and comprehensive teacher-training programmes. Under the purview of health, the PPP committed to reduce the maternal and infant mortality rates and achieve 100 percent coverage for routine immunisation of children under two years of age.

The party stated that it would work on enacting legislation and formulating policies to provide water and sanitation facilities, and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Creation of a sports fund and state-of-the-art stadiums and sports facilities was also given due importance.

The PTI promised to increase the education budget to four percent of GDP, and increase the number of girls’ secondary schools by upgrading schools in high-enrolment areas every year and launching nation-wide radio, television and online self-learning programmes for secondary level students.

Furthermore, a Teach for Pakistan programme would be launched to attract high quality teachers towards public-sector educational institutes. The PTI vowed to make special arrangements to provide sports activities to children in schools and establishing separate sports complexes.

The PTI’s manifesto said the party would provide facilities to differently-abled children and offer hearing aids and wheelchairs to those who need them. The party would also conduct provincial and national Special Olympics and sporting events, and arrange for sports federations to sponsor international participation of special athletes below and above 18 years of age.

Apprehensive about Pakistan ranking second-worst in terms of gender parity, as per the World Economic Forum’s report, the PTI aimed to increase girls’ access to education and reduce their subjection to patriarchy-induced violence. In order to facilitate victims of gender-based crimes, the number of female police officers would be increased. Moreover, establishment of special gender-based violence courts for additional protection of female victims was also on the party’s agenda.

In the health sector, the PTI would launch a large-scale national level Maternal Health Programme. Special attention would be given to reduce maternal and child mortality rates, which at present are one of the worst in the region. Up-scaling of the Sehat Insaf Card programme and expansion of primary and secondary healthcare have been set as important targets.

The number of Basic Health Units and Rural Health Centres will be increased to ensure each village has access to a facility within a 10km radius. In Pakistan, nearly 39,000 children under the age of five die every year due to diarrhoea caused by microbial contaminants in the water supply. Cognisant of the country’s abysmally low performance in this sector, the PTI has vowed to improve the water and sanitation system.

The PML-N had promised to achieve universal primary enrolment by 2023. It also vowed to allocate at least four percent GDP to education in order to fulfil its commitment to universal early childhood education in schools. Provision of equitable access to education for girls and quality education to children with special needs has also been promised. The party pledged overhauling the quality of education by providing state-of-the-art school infrastructure and fostering technology-led teaching methods.

Their manifesto promises promoting a teaching culture that instils creativity, analytical abilities and cultural values. In order to curtail the private education sector’s exploitation, the party has promised to bring the sector under strict regulatory control. Children belonging to society’s poor segment will be provided scholarships.

With reference to health, the PML-N’s most important goal would be providing universal access to preventive and primary healthcare to children and mothers. For the purpose of improving children’s food intake and reducing the rate of stunting and malnutrition, a special strategy ‘First 1,000 days’ would be implemented. The party would ensure a 20 percent increase in the annual expenditure on health, ramping up the budget allocation to at least two percent of GDP by 2023.

The PML-N was committed to eradicate polio and expand the immunisation coverage to 90 percent. However, the manifesto failed to explicitly mention the issue of child sexual abuse but promises to tackle violence against children through a complaint registration system and maintaining the anonymity of the victim.

The ANP, mainly a regional party contesting in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, promised to increase the health and education budget to six percent of GDP — so far the highest figure claimed by any party. It emphasised providing maternal and child healthcare, provision of clean drinking water and preventive healthcare. The ANP promised to improve the literacy rate of girls by 25 percent, and raise their school enrolment and minimise their dropout rate.

The ANP was the only party that gave special attention to issues of child labour. The party said it would review, legislate upon and implement child labour laws to ensure that children under the age of 16 years do not work in formal and informal sectors, including as domestic helpers. They had also committed to implement the juvenile justice system with emphasis on education and rehabilitation facilities, and make efforts to prohibit all forms of violence against children such as corporal punishment, sexual abuse and kidnapping. It vowed to strengthen the National Human Rights Commission and establish provincial and district chapters to monitor the status of child rights.

The MQM–Pakistan had also promised to reform the education sector by improving the quality of teaching in schools and regulating seminaries. In the health sector, the party promised ensuring full coverage of the EPI (extended programme of immunisation), and raise the allocation for education to five percent of GDP, and take measures against child abuse, child labour, domestic violence and child marriages.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) set an ambitious target of achieving 100 percent literacy rate in the next five years. The party said that it will allocate five percent of GDP and 25 percent of the provincial budget to education. Islamic education, including Hadith and Quran teaching will be made compulsory at the elementary level.

Their education reforms focused on the character-building of children and the youth. The MMA also laid stress on child healthcare and early childhood development. As an alternative to co-education, the party had proposed establishing separate schools and sports complexes for girls.

The only thing related to children in the Balochistan National Party’s (BNP) manifesto was establishing 11,000 new primary schools and upgrading 1,200 middle schools in Balochistan. The only wish the children of Pakistan have is that the new government will give a little more attention to them.

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