[**A social contract**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1754945/a-social-contract)

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WATCHING the news recently, I heard the IG of Punjab Police berating women for having the audacity to be out protesting in public. He used the damning word ‘modern’ to describe them.

Society fears disruptors — those elements, sometimes individuals or groups or even political parties, that throw away the rulebook and attempt a paradigm shift away from current accepted attitudes and practices. In many polities, both extremes exist side by side — conservatives that battle even minor changes to what they consider traditional norms, and disruptors who aim for revolution in some shape or form. The pendulum swinging from one side to the other comes to rest at the middle ground. Or so we are led to believe.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a swing of the pendulum from one relative extreme to another — however, the underlying construct of rulership remained the same — more authoritarianism under religious guise as compared to the modern ‘liberal’ guise it had under the Shah. Extreme religious conservatism, however, didn’t seem to prevent the education of girls. In Iran, female adult literacy has risen from 24 per cent in 1976 to 81pc in 2016. According to World Bank estimates approximately 80pc of girls are enrolled in secondary school (2017 figures).

Saudi Arabia’s theocracy also didn’t find educating girls to be a problem. Progress for equality in girls’ and women’s education has resulted in women’s literacy rate consistently increasing over the decades. In 1992, women in Saudi Arabia had an average literacy rate of 57pc. In 2017, the literacy rate for women was 99pc, according to Unesco. The winds of change sweeping through the kingdom today are, in part, a result of this focus on education for all.

Extreme religious conservatism in Iran and Saudi Arabia hasn’t prevented the education of girls.

Compare these figures with Pakistan where for decades the provision of quality education seems to be such a challenge that no government has been able to do more than achieve minor successes. In 2018, girls’ enrolment in secondary school was an abysmal 34pc with only 22pc of girls actually completing this level of schooling. Why are we always lagging behind in areas that would actually benefit our population, our GDP, and every other human development indicator?

The answer lies in our social norms and attitudes, which seems to be the only difference between us and more conservative regimes like Iran. Girls’ education is that one disruptor that, in the eyes of most Pakistani males, could have serious consequences for their authority and power. Unfortunately, years of authoritarianism embedded in sociocultural norms that foster exclusion as a means to control others, impact not only the oppressors but also their subjects. Men and women find themselves confined by oppressive mental taboos that hinder their ability to transcend conventional boundaries of thought. The education of girls, in particular, holds the potential to initiate transformative change, making it a matter that warrants careful consideration. Let’s take Iran as an example: recent statistics indicate that contraceptive usage exceeds 70pc, and the average number of births per woman stands slightly above two, based on 2020 data. Today, Iran faces further disruption to its religious regime — but while the government backlash has been severe, the young (men and women) are educated and aware. They want progress.

Are social attitudes so difficult to break in Pakistan? The contraceptive prevalence rate is currently 34pc, and our population will cross the 300-million mark by 2040 if unchecked. Progress seems to be made in fits and spurts, but this is often followed by backsliding. One recent success linked to supporting more girls into education (especially secondary/higher education) is the Federal Shariat Court’s decision that upheld the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013, which places the minimum age of marriage as 18 years for both boys and girls in the province. This should be considered a national victory. Setting the minimum marriage age at 18 offers opportunities for girls and their families to seriously consider secondary schooling as a preferred option to breaking the law. Education, after all, is the best form of human capital investment that can yield high returns for individuals and their families. And these high returns occur not just in terms of GDP contribution, but as importantly, in overall human development indicators. More years of schooling leads to less opportunity or choice of early marriage that, in tandem with multiple pregnancies, is a harbinger for poor health and nutrition outcomes for girls and women.

Unfortunately, the good news is balanced by the alarming realisation that two-thirds of girls (66pc) who complete primary school are prevented from attending middle/secondary school simply because there are very few such schools available for them. This historic inequality in access to education has cultural and traditional roots, which is reinforced by the old ways of thinking and planning.

But mindsets are changing — as digital interfacing becomes easier, cheaper and the information highway supercharges its way across urban-rural and income divides, disruption is bound to enter the education system. Devolution, down to the individual school level is critical if girls are to be given better education opportunities. Primary schools need to introduce secondary schooling within their physical boundaries. Young, local teachers need to be trained and provided the opportunity to work at such schools. Devolution means authorising schools’ leadership to address challenges and develop opportunities experienced by them. Younger teachers will have new ideas and parents of girls, and the girls themselves, are already demanding their rights to be educated members of society.

Critical voices from within political and religious leadership need to take note and support this demand by paving the way for positive disruptors and innovators to provide real time solutions to the challenge.

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