**Women in Former FATA and Basic Human Rights**

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In the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, women are treated as mere objects who do not enjoy their own opinions about life and are not allowed to live freely as per their choice. Surrounded by socio-cultural taboos, women of this region live under slavery, bound by family traditions and surviving generational curses.

Deprived of basic education and healthcare, women have to suffer immensely sometimes at the cost of their life. The region is difficult to access by local state authorities due to its volatile nature and militarized status for decades. Even after its merger with KPK, the conditions are still the same. Discrimination against women is ubiquitous all over Pakistan but the situation of women’s rights in FATA is far worse than in any other region. The reason for this wide difference lies in the dark history of this region and the subsequent socio-political turmoil. The unpeaceful environment coupled with political upheavals led to the loss of basic amenities for people. Political instability has given rise to miserable conditions that could still not be addressed and resolved. The pre-partition era (FCR) 1901 has also added insult to the injury by exempting the region from mainstream society. During all the years, no law or regulation of the country was found applicable in FATA given the prevalence of jirga culture and decisions made by the elders of the tribe. The archaic tradition upheld oppressive customs, damaging women’s Islamic and social standing in the affairs affecting them.

The exercise of decisions by the jirga council has played havoc with the social fabric of FATA’s region. The concept of dowry has been widely condemned and criticized in the mainstream society of Pakistan with laws made against the practice. On the contrary, dowry is considered legal in FATA and women are denied access to their share in the property. A woman is considered her family’s honour whereas the latter is given the right to sell her and do her trading in exchange for wealth and property.

“Women risk punishment, even death, if the honor of the clan is violated”, explains Sakeena Rehman, an Awami National Party (ANP) representative from Mohmand Agency.

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Another senior member of ANP, Bushra Gohar addressing the women’s rights in FATA said, ” Fata has always been treated as a strategic space where people have been denied their political rights for 70 years.”

A representative of ANP from this region stated the pitiful state of schools and status of education saying,” Our women and girls want to go to school, but all they do is to collect sticks from the mountains and walk miles for water. Change will come only with a legal system that replicates the country’s judicial mechanism.”

Furthermore, the provision of standard education is absent from a majority of the schools in FATA. Most of the schools got damaged during the Taliban era with their infrastructure never repaired due to lack of funds and negligence of the government authorities. Literacy rates in FATA are the lowest throughout the country. The overall literacy rate here is 19.9 per cent, with the literacy rate of boys near 34.2 per cent and 5.75 per cent for girls which is below average.

The quality of health services provided to the people has been identified as a significant impediment to their proper growth and development. There is a dire need to strengthen the health system of FATA by providing basic health services to its inhabitants especially women who are dependent on men to survive. The availability of quality medicines, maternal health care units, child health services, separate female attending rooms, and highly qualified female doctors should be ensured on an urgent basis. Moreover, the establishment of minimum standards, training of technical staff, hiring of female nurses, and developing the health management information system are some of the other prominent ways to improve the quality of medical services in the tribal regions.

A psychiatrist, Dr Mian Iftikhar Hussain, reported the deplorable health conditions of women in FATA and expressed his concern about them. According to his research, the majority of the women here are undergoing psychological problems due to threatening violence by Taliban militants and loss of family and possessions.

“Most of the displaced people have developed psychological problems because they have lost their near and dear ones in war between Taliban and the army, besides losing their trades, shops and agricultural productivity,” he said.

Experts insist the awful status of women’s rights in FATA can only get better if it is brought in parallel with the other provinces of Pakistan. It is high time the people of FATA, especially its women, are included in the mainstream society of Pakistan, giving them equal rights and sources of equal development.