

Gender

# Gender concerns and PRS

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**T**he Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is one of the key public documents, which seems to be in the process of completion forever. For the last three years the document has kept on being presented by the government in various forums including Pakistan Development Forum and number of consultative meetings held at the provincial and national levels as a draft PRSP. The delay in finalising the PRSP is perhaps to avoid criticism and expected protest from the poor and the civil society organisations that are extremely critical of the draft document. In the context of rising poverty with nearly forty million people living below the poverty line, the PRSP assumes critical importance for the large majority of poor in the country. The draft PRSP has been challenged and met severe criticism from all quarters of the society because of the process adopted by the government to develop the strategy for poverty reduction and the content of the draft PRSP itself.

Although the concerned departments of the government (Ministry of Finance, Planning Commission) are claiming that a participatory process has been adopted to formulate the PRSP through holding consultative meetings of stakeholders at the district, provincial and national levels. However, it is an irrefutable fact that these meetings were neither consultative nor participatory. In most of the meetings, selected people were invited. No effort is being made to-date to translate the PRSP written in English into local language to make it accessible to the general public. Our English speaking elite has hardly anything to say on the subject. Those who were genuinely concerned and submitted their comments/suggestions to improve the poverty reduction strategy, their input has neither been included in the PRSP nor reflected in the documentation of the process.

As far as the content of the draft

PRSP is concerned, interestingly, it has been criticised by all points of views — radical, moderate, religious conservative and women right activists.

The radicals rejected PRSP on the ground that the document does not address the root causes of poverty, which are a growth oriented macro-economic framework, and an unequal distribution of resources. They argue that the overall framework of PRSP is within the neo-liberal paradigm that does not offer any opportunity to reduce or eliminate poverty. Within this context, the PRSP is simply a charity effort, which denies people's fundamental right to live in dignity. Poverty cannot be reduced on sustainable basis by doling out Zakat fund or food stamps to poor and turning them into beggars.

Religious conservatives attribute all ills of the society due to westernisation. Therefore, the introduction of Shariat and Islamisation of the economy is panacea for reducing poverty. Since they do not see any of this as part of the PRSP, therefore, they reject it as an un-Islamic document.

For moderates who do understand the limitation of liberal democratic states and the neo-liberal economies to alleviate poverty argue that economic growth which is highly desired by neo-liberal economies is contingent upon human capital investments. Thus, the continuing greater emphasis on accelerating economic growth in the PRSP that assumes that the economic growth by itself will generate higher employment opportunities and subsequently people will be in a better position to take care of their social needs is misplaced. They assert that there is no causal relationship between the economic growth and poverty reduction which is currently reflected from the fact that lately the GNP per capita has registered a stronger growth rate while poverty continues to rise in Pakistan. They reject the PRSP because of its misplaced emphasis on economic growth rather than on human development.

For women rights activists, gender is a category, which is systematically

structured in poverty that mediated men and women's experience of poverty differently. The Participatory Poverty Assessment report shows that poverty has a significant gender dimension in Pakistan. The phenomenon of feminisation of poverty has officially been recognised and is clearly mentioned in the PRSP that without addressing gender dimension, the issue of poverty cannot be addressed in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, women rights activists are contesting PRSP for not going beyond the rhetoric of engendering growth and gender equity. The strategy seeks solutions and ways out of poverty trap while being rooted in the given socio-economic contexts which is based on gender exploitation and public-private dichotomy. The macro-economic framework of the PRS has inherent inability to address effectively the issue of poverty reduction and gender mainstreaming.

**T**he argument of women right activists is extremely powerful.

However, my assertion is that we need to adopt two pronged strategies in order to be effective and relevant in the poverty reduction debate in the country. On the one hand we must continue to work and offer an honest intellectual analysis of the phenomenon of poverty, its root causes, processes and solutions which may even be too radical to be implemented for the liberal democratic state. However, the critical view of macro-economic policies and cultural context which thrives on the exploitation of various socially marginalised categories of people such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, religious minorities, provide the knowledge base to those who has the vested interest to bring radical change in the society.

On the other hand it is equally important to make use of the opportunities no matter how limiting those are created by the neo-liberal economies. Poor have to live and make their living in the given socio-economic context. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that marginalised communities never

stop demanding their rights knowing fully well that there is an inherent inability of these public institutions to deliver on behalf of the poor.

It is quite elitist and comfortable to take purely an academic radical position, criticise the PRS and refuse to engage in working with the existing systems and structures because these are patriarchal in nature and non-responsive towards gender needs. Whereas it will be equally naive to work with these institutions for mainstreaming gender without having the critical understanding of the patriarchal nature of these structures. Therefore, we need to combine our radical analysis with pragmatic approach of working with the system and should demand strategic interventions for institutional reform that will create space to be stretched later for radical shift. The strategy which combines radical analysis with pragmatic approach has been effective in many developed countries where liberal democratic states are forced to reform themselves and deliver better on the social contract between the state and the citizens.

The demand of gender mainstreaming in PRS is completely unrealistic and not possible without changing the nature of mainstream. Demands to make PRS more gender responsive should be strategic in nature, hitting at structural level and must be informed by the feminist analysis. The present day state which is a patriarchal construct can best deliver on gender equity but not on gender equality. Therefore, the PRS has the potential to integrate gender concerns but it cannot mainstream them. For gender mainstreaming and gender equality we need to mobilise people to struggle for the complete restructuring the society and the state by removing gender, class, race and other disadvantaged as the principles of social organisation and economic production.

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