

Bridging the gender gap

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Gender

IT is unbelievable that instead of focusing on pressing national problems, we should be running after non-issues and making them the cause of discord and violence as in the Gujranwala case. Neither the MMA, nor the government was justified in adopting a confrontational stance on the question of girls' participation in the mini-marathon. It was improper for them to fight an ugly "street battle" on an issue which, as the prime minister suggested, would have been best debated in parliament.

Nobody, not even the MMA hard-liners, were opposed to the girls' participation in sports activities including marathons, provided that they were conducted within the bounds of our culture and religion. Our society is not yet ready for mixed marathons, or for that matter, mixed swimming events. Even President Musharraf's "enlightened moderation" which our people rightly welcome has no place for "culturally inappropriate" activities.

However, a lot remains to be done for genuine "gender-mainstreaming and empowerment" of women in our country through the elimination of discriminatory policies and mediaeval practices. Instead of organizing activities or events perceived as "culturally inappropriate", we should be applying our energies and resources to plugging the gender gap in education, health and employment. It is in these critical areas that Pakistani women need to be included in the mainstream.

The administration of justice is another crucial area where gender-based discrimination manifests itself for the women in Pakistan. Despite the relative privilege of some women, the large majority remains structurally disadvantaged as a result of our discriminatory legal system and obscurant norms and attitudes. They are subjected to barbaric and senseless customs and laws such as karo-kari, the Hudood Ordinances, Qisas and marriage to the Quran.

They are also victims of gruesome forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, with pervasive denial of justice. Successive governments have done very little to rationalize the legal system or the laws that heavily infringe on women's rights. Effective legal measures, including penal sanctions, civil remedies and compensatory provisions are needed to protect women against all kinds of violence and harassment.

Pakistan remains one of those countries where women continue to be denied their basic rights and fundamental freedoms as "equal citizens". Our customary gender norms are at the root of the pervasive polit-

to reversing some of the existing policies and laws.

This would inevitably require courage and consistency of approach on the part of our governments, which unfortunately we did not see when the government knuckled under its own politics of expediency and retreated on its earlier, correct position on the religion column in new passports. We witnessed another disappointing performance by the ruling party when it joined the religious ranks in parliament to kill a private bill moved by one of its own women members seeking changes to the controversial honour killing law.

Violence against women remains a serious and widespread menace. Regrettably, there are systemic, almost insurmountable barriers to justice confronting victims of violence, rape and other excesses. Women who

ditionally been an active participant in these activities, was listed among the few countries that had failed to furnish their progress reports on the implementation of the commitments for achieving gender equality and facilitating the advancement of women.

Widening gender inequalities in our country will not be bridged by staging sports events for girls in public. The gender gaps will be closed only with concrete and sustained actions backed by the requisite allocation of resources to promote literacy and basic health services for women in Pakistan, especially in rural and other backward areas. Effective legal and enforcement measures are necessary to deal with gender-based violence.

An editorial in this newspaper, quoting a recent Unicef report, has drawn our attention to the "appalling" gender

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gap in Pakistan's education sector. The literacy rate of women in Pakistan is less than 28 per cent as against 53 per cent for men. Our misplaced priorities and cultural barriers have kept the ratio of girls' enrolment in Pakistan among the lowest in the world. Even countries like Bangladesh are doing far better. We need more schools for girls, especially in the country's backward areas.

In a welcome initiative, the government of Punjab has launched a programme to subsidize the cost of schooling for girls. This approach needs to be emulated by other provincial governments. With potential benefits of subsidized costs, improved physical access and a "culturally appropriate" design and environment, we can expect a sharp increase in girls' enrolment.

The statistics in other social sectors including health are no less dismal. The maternal mortality rate is among the highest in the world. Reproductive health services are available only to a tiny fraction of the female population. Women's participation in the economic arena is disproportionately low, with women constituting only 28 per cent of the country's labour force.

According to a study, while our defence budget is constantly rising, the resources allocated to education and health, especially for women, continue to be among the lowest in the Third World, and much of what is to be distributed is lost in rampant, institutionalized corruption.

Basic health services need to be provided to every village, with special focus on preventive and curative facilities and women and child welfare programmes. Iran has one of the best basic health service systems in the developing world which we could use as a model.

We have other problems, too, that need to be addressed. But these are rooted in our misdirected culture of religious extremism and obscurantism which we promoted as an instrument of our "geo-strategic" pursuits.

report rape or sexual assault face several obstacles, including the possibility of being prosecuted under the 1979 Hudood Ordinances. Some of the victims prefer to seek asylum in other countries rather than live under conditions of insecurity in their homeland.

Clear violations of international law on the rights of women occur daily in Pakistan and are regularly chronicled in the reports of international human rights organizations. Laws that discriminate against women remain in the books and are actively enforced while discriminatory access to government resources and services continues unchecked.

Pakistan is obliged by its ratification of international treaties to ensure respect for women's rights and fundamental freedoms. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw), to which Pakistan acceded in 1996, requires the government "to take action to eliminate violence against women as a form of discrimination that inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men."

Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Pakistan has not signed but which is a cornerstone of international human rights law, requires governments "to ensure the rights to life and security of the person of all individuals in their jurisdiction, without distinction of any kind, including sex."

According to Human Rights Watch, Pakistan is in flagrant violation of human rights

where women continue to be denied their basic rights and fundamental freedoms as "equal citizens". Our customary gender norms are at the root of the pervasive political, legal, economic and social inequalities that perpetuate women's lack of access to resources, education, health care, employment, decision-making and participation in public life.

In recent years, no doubt, there has been a conspicuous increase in the number of women in our political institutions, but merely showcasing the presence of a few privileged females in our legislative chambers is neither gender-mainstreaming nor empowering women. We need more affirmative political and economic action that genuinely seeks to address the "core issues" underlying women's socio-economic backwardness in Pakistan.

Successive governments in Pakistan have only paid politically motivated lip-service to the cause of women. No government, not even the present one, has shown the courage needed to grapple with the primitive gender norms inherent in our legal system and customs. Instead of indulging in diversionary antics, which at times may be inconsistent with our religious and eastern value system, we need to focus more on coherent and concrete legal reforms, even if we have to resort

viduals in their jurisdiction, without distinction of any kind, including sex."

According to Human Rights Watch, Pakistan is in flagrant violation of "women's rights to life and security of the person" while women victims of violence continue to suffer systemic denial of justice. The recent cases of Mukhtar Mai and Shazia Khalid are classic but painful examples of gender-based denial of access to justice in our country.

Pakistan has been a leading player in international forums contributing significantly to the promotion of global consensus on issues related to social and economic inequalities. These include the Beijing declaration and Platform for Action (1995) for the advancement of women, which recognized that "equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice, and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace."

A 10-yearly progress review of the Beijing Declaration was carried out at the recent annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York. The outcome of this review called for "further action from governments for full and accelerated implementation" of the Beijing Platform for Action. Pakistan, which has tra-

misdirected culture of religious extremism and obscurantism which we promoted as an instrument of our "geo-strategic" pursuits. In the process, Pakistan became the hotbed of jihadi militancy, sectarian violence and terrorism.

A nation's interests and capabilities, its problems and disorders, and its operational approach determine its health and inner strength. In our case, the stability and survival of our nation will depend on "the system and methods" of our government, on our policies and priorities, and on our ability to cope with the challenges of our times.

The key to our social problems regarding the "betterment and empowerment" of women in Pakistan lies in comprehensive "legislative and budgetary" packages to close the existing gender gaps in our health, education and employment sectors, and to remove all gender-based barriers in our legal system.

We will not be able to project our image as a disciplined and forward-looking nation, unless we achieve and project a healthy balance, moderation and consistency in all expressions of our national behaviour, including sports, art, music and architecture.

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