

Roadblocks to gender equality

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Gender
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WE have a long way to go to achieve gender equality, women's empowerment and the due status they deserve. Not a day passes without reports of honour killing, rape and domestic violence against women while religious leaders give vitriolic statements against the female community for participating in marathons or sports, while the government prefers to look the other way. Why are women so downtrodden in an Islamic society? What are the factors that make them second, even third class citizens?

Education is supposed to be the panacea for all our troubles. What kind of education do we have — teacher shortages, absenteeism, minimal supervision, poor infrastructure, shortage of authentic, quality teaching material, and of schools and one of the lowest-budget allocation in this part of the world, about two per cent of the GDP. So the kind of education our youth is getting generally does not open their minds, broaden their vision or stretch their intellectual capacity which would enable them to break the shackles of age-old traditions and culture of tribal and feudal society.

We are a tribal-cum-feudal society — Balochistan and the NWFP are tribal while Sindh and Punjab are mostly feudal, barring a few urban centres and big cities. In any case only half of our male population is literate, not educated, according to the Economic Survey. A little more than one quarter of the female population is literate. Higher education is restricted to about three per cent of the total population. A widespread, quality education, if provided to women, can help them in their efforts to make progress.

Almost all of our rural and most of our urban population is governed and guided by customs, mores and cultural traditions. The centuries-old formula of role assignment, under which woman takes care of a man, his home and his children and he takes care of everything else and provides for them, still works here. Besides she is keeper of the honour of the family and the tribe as well.

Being an expendable commodity she can be killed on minor pretexts even for being seen talking to a stranger. She has no say in the fateful decision as to whom she marries; if she dares to make her own choice, males of the family or 'biradari' are most likely to kill her to satisfy their imagined sense of honour. Even rape victims come into the category of 'karakari'.

It is a tribal custom that on being asked about the size of one's family, a father will only tell you the number of his male offspring. A girl child is nobody, has no identity, no status — she is something to be ashamed of. Tribal sardars and feudals who get educated at Oxford or

is wrong. Mutual consent and compatibility in marriage are important," she said.

Why don't our religious leaders run a campaign against forced marriages and in support of women's right to choose their life partners — which is Islamic — instead of frothing at the mouth about women's sports?

Economic empowerment of them is imperative in giving them an identity of their own and building up their status as independent human being. Why is a woman always referred to in relationship to a man? This mother, sister, daughter leit-motif has become nauseating in its repetition by our religious and political leaders and in our traditional literature. If she is not any of the above three she is the wife of so and so. Incidentally in most Muslim societies specially in Saudi Arabia a woman is known by her maiden name without the appendage of her husband's name.

Involvement in decision making and economic activity is *sine qua non* of gender equality. Islam does not forbid women from owning property, doing business and gives them rights of self-expression. The mother of all Muslims, Ummul-Momineen Hazrat Khadija, was herself a successful business woman. The early history of Islam is replete with example of women who fought for the glory of Islam and achieved distinction in knowledge. Hazrat Ayesha is an example of great source of knowledge on Islamic fiqh and whose opinion was sought on complex matters.

In urban centres where knowledge, training and credit are available to a certain extent women are more active in trying to become economically viable. They are running boutiques, galleries, shops and garment business. They have become a visible and important part of the media in all its manifestations as well in banking and financial sectors to some extent. However, in private and public sector enterprises there are only nine per cent women decision makers as CEOs, managers and directors, etc. They have not been able to break the "glass ceiling" yet with a few, rare exceptions.

For the multitude of women in rural and poor sector, the situation is worse. Social taboos are stronger, opportunities for quality education are not available and there is absence of professional training centres to provide them training.

Some micro-credit schemes, now operational, encourage self-employment and entrepreneurship among women.

An empirical study by the Gender Development Programme at Social Sciences Institute points out that there is little employment or enterprise development for women as men remain the main focus of income generation activity. "In most cases profit from women-led businesses is relatively low. The main reasons could be the low experience and low literacy as well".

It is not a woman's fight alone for her rights, status and gender equality. In a society like ours it has to be a crusade for both men and women. Women's liberation from the age-old shackles of social traditions and cultural customs would be incomplete unless it also means the liberation

to be ashamed of. Tribal sardars and feudals who get educated at Oxford or Cambridge and send their sons to foreign universities, keep their tribesmen in the era of ignorance and darkness.

Hudood Ordinance's many clauses have caused injustice to women and the recommendations of the government-appointed women's commission are just a testimony of that and no more. All the NGOs, women legislators like Sherry Rehman and Kashmala Tariq can and should go on trying despite being repeatedly blocked by the obduracy of even their own partymen who have a feudal and tribal mindset, besides virulent opposition by the alliance of the mullahs, as well as the expediency of the government.

However, social taboos and related practices cannot be altered or simply made to disappear as soon as a law or an ordinance comes into force. Centuries-old attitudes cannot change overnight in a semi-literate society where traditions and customs have a greater force than any law or act of parliament which clashes with them. An act of honour killing is a downright murder and there are penal code punishments for the crime. Do these laws stop honour killings? Any act of legislation which goes against prevalent traditions passes into limbo where it is honoured more in its defiance.

Customs, traditions and religion are put to use to browbeat women. The religious leaders have their own version of Islam. A madressah (where learning by rote is the norm) educated Imam of a mosque tells his congregation in the rural areas and even in cities what to do to women who do not follow their version of rules. This, then, becomes a religious guidance for those who know little about religion.

Consenting to or choosing a man by a woman to contract a marriage with is a right given to her by Islam. In Pakistan most of the honour killing of women takes place because they choose their spouses against the will of the family. 'Biradari' norms, customs and traditions and the family convenience can lead to marrying off a young girl of 12 or 15 to an old man of 60 or 70 or any other nincompoop of biradari, some times in an exchange (watta satta) marriage. The silently suffering majority of women have no say in decisions about their lives.

The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Sheikh Abdul Aziz has strongly condemned giving women in marriage against their will and calls it 'Disobeying God and His Prophet (PBUH)', said a news report recently. "Forcing a woman to marry someone she does not want and preventing her from wedding someone she wants is not permissible", a 'fatwa' of the Grand Mufti says. Sheikh Abdul Aziz said: "Anyone who does not give up this pre-Islamic practice should be punished by imprisonment and should not be released until he drops his demand which contravenes the provisions of the Shariah."

Fatima Bundagji, Director of Women's Empowerment and Research at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, welcomed the 'fatwa', saying: "it is a cultural problem that has to be addressed. Some people tend to take cultural beliefs as part of religious tradition. This

incomplete unless it also means the liberation of our men from their innate and ingrained prejudices against women. It is about time men gave women a fair deal. The right to be themselves, to live freely, to work and to follow the dictates of their own nature as individual human beings and not to hold them as possessions.

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It also goes on to say: "The credit was advanced in the name of female members but used by a male of the household." Grameen Bank which has been doing so well for the last so many years in Bangladesh may be because of more literacy and absence of feudal and tribal social taboos against women.

According to the figures available in the Labour Force Survey (1999-2000) participation in crude activity was 9.3 per cent for women and in refined activity 13.7 per cent for Pakistan. However, in rural areas the rates are higher in both activities i.e. 10.7 per cent and 16.1 per cent respectively.

So, it seems our rural women contribute more to the labour force, perhaps because Pakistan's economy is mainly agrarian and that the agriculture is a family-oriented profession in rural areas. However, the income generated by women is invariably at the disposal of the male head of the family. These figures of female labour force show women's participation is the lowest in our region.

One will have to admit that most roadblocks to gender equality in our society are man-made, not religious edicts. The principles of Islam and their application in practical life are vastly at variance with each other to the detriment of half of our population. The great 'Aalims' who propounded Fiqah and Muslim jurisprudence have all been men. Even "Behashati Zeevar" which describes in details how Muslim women's behaviour should be, even about intimate personal matters, is a man's edict, however learned. Superiority of men over women is established and women almost dehumanized. Practice of Islam has been taken over by social taboos, customs and cultural restraints all of which favour men, as they are the arbiter.

It is not a woman's fight alone for her rights, status and gender equality. In a progressive society like ours it has to be a crusade for both men and women. Women's liberation from the age-old shackles of social traditions and cultural customs would be incomplete unless it also means the liberation of our men from their innate and ingrained prejudices against women.

It is about time men gave women a fair deal. The right to be themselves, to live freely, to work and to follow the dictates of their own nature as individual human beings and not to hold them as possessions. In a fluid and changing society like ours where many cultural patterns, from highly westernized to rigidly traditional, run parallel, women too have to tread carefully in their changing roles, because it is men's emancipation they seek and naturally the latter would be averse to it.

The feudal-tribal mindset of men even in this age of 'enlightened moderation' is dead against women. The government, despite its profession to the contrary, has done hardly anything for women except some cosmetic measures which take us nowhere.

Mukhataran Mai's case is an example of its blundering, bungling ways which compounds an already difficult situation. ■