**Implementing the New National Gender Policy Framework**

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On March 8, International Women’s Day, Pakistan announced the launch of a new National Gender Policy Framework. As the program for the launch event stated, this Framework is important because “…of the dismal national standing against international gender development indices and a widening gender gap which is costing Pakistan PKR $500 billion annually and closing which can boost the country’s GDP by 30 percent.”

The World Economic Forum releases various Global Gender Gap Reports with country profiles annually. Pakistan has performed poorly in all of them.

Pakistan’s ranking on the Gender Inequality Index, which measures inequalities in reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity, was 133 out of 160 countries. Its ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index, which measures gender-related economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, was 151 out of 153 countries. And, Pakistan stood last in ranking for the advancement of female leadership in government, corporate sector, STEM and entrepreneurship.

Pakistan also performs poorly in terms of ensuring the safety and security of women. A report issued recently by the Sustainable Social Development Organisation (SSDO) states that 27,273 cases involving violence against women were recorded in 2021 alone.

The quality and excellence of the drawing matter. But what matters much more is whether the building is constructed according to the specifications.

Given these grim statistics, the National Gender Policy Framework (NGPF or framework) is a necessary initiative in order to reduce and ultimately eliminate all forms of gender inequality and discrimination in Pakistan. Accomplishing this is essential and ensuring the full participation and empowerment of women in Pakistani society are crucial for the sustainable development of the country.

The NGPF is targeted in six major areas: governance; equality and quality in education; employment and economic empowerment; political participation and meaningful engagement; safety and security; and, health and well-being.

In the Governance area, the policy recommends establishing gender-transformative governance structures, gender-equal institutional transformation, strengthening the Government’s capacity to mainstream gender in its policies and programs, and ensuring institutionalization of gender equality principles in the government priorities and action plans.

In the education area, the target is to build enabling environments for women and girls to learn and to be equipped with employable and high-income generating skills with a special focus on counselling and digital skills. For economic empowerment, the framework targets promoting equitable access to work opportunities with conducive workplaces as well as enabling an enterprising environment and necessary business skills.

For political participation and engagement, the policy aims at creating avenues for and advancing female leadership, providing mentorship and engagement to meaningfully integrate women’s voices in program design and policy decisions as well as accelerating the registration of women voters.

For the safety and security of women, the framework aims at providing gender conducive work environments for women to operate in, raising awareness on women’s protection against discrimination and gender-equitable masculinities, enhancing access to justice for women and less privileged/marginalized gender groups, establishing gender-responsive infrastructure and strengthening institutional compliance with laws to counter harassment at workplaces and in cyberspace.

For health and wellbeing, the policy targets integrating personal health and reproductive health in formal education streams, protecting and promoting female mental health, striving for gender equality in health leadership, and providing hygiene and sanitation facilities in educational institutions, and markets.

The NGPF was put forward by Pakistan’s Planning Commission. The Planning Commission spent from March to December 2021 undertaking “an intensive nation-wide multi-channel exercise … in order to set national gender policy framework agenda identifying focused, evidence-informed high impact strategic priorities for accelerating progress on gender mainstreaming and improving the consistently low ranking on gender indices.”

The Commission and all those who contributed input used to create the Framework should be commended for their good work. It should be remembered, however, that a framework is like a blueprint for a building.

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The same holds true for a policy framework and plan. What matters is the manner in which the plan is implemented as planned or worst case, whether it sits on a shelf and gathers dust.

A well-known saying goes “Plan your work and work your plan.” Pakistan has done excellent work in preparing its plan. It must now do the same in working on that plan.

If it does, the framework will become a reality benefiting both the women and the entirety of Pakistan society. With women as equal citizens, Pakistan will not only boost its country’s GDP it will also boost the well-being of all.

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