**[State of gender inequality](https://www.dawn.com/news/599978/state-of-gender-inequality)**

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**PAKISTAN is no exception to the generally abysmal state of gender equality the world over. About 50 per cent of Pakistani girls drop out of school and our literacy rate for women is amongst the lowest in the world.**

As of 2005 only 16 per cent of Pakistani women were reported as economically active while a 1996 study by the women’s division of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan showed that domestic violence takes place in about 80 per cent of Pakistani households.

Perhaps the most widely cited reason for gender inequality in the Pakistani context relates to the social custom of exalting sons above daughters. But is the difference in the treatment of sons and daughters the reason or merely a symptom of our present predicament? A meaningful answer to such a question requires an examination of not just cultural norms and traditions but the economic situation as well.

Although women’s inferior status to men exists in all strata of Pakistani society, the reasons and manifestations of the inequality differ quite substantially as we move from one socio-economic class and region to another.

While women of high-income urban families are more apt to receive higher education, they may still face restrictions in terms of labour-market opportunities.

According to the 1990-91 Pakistan Integrated Household Survey (PIHS) the female labour force participation rate in urban areas was 17 per cent.

The average literacy rate of women in Pakistan’s rural areas has been estimated as approximately one fifth of female literacy rates in urban areas, yet the PIHS indicated that the female labour force participation rate was 45 per cent in rural areas.

Looking at the economics of gender inequality, one aspect that is particularly striking is the link between gender discrimination and the traditions surrounding marriage in Pakistani society. Particularly in the case of poor families, the joy associated with the birth of a daughter is, to some extent, tempered by the substantial financial burden that it places on parents.

Despite government-issued mandates aimed at curtailing wedding expenses, nuptials remain extravagant and parents of daughters continue to face considerable costs especially due to the custom of dowry giving. The marriage of a daughter also signifies a drop in household earnings. Hence it is no surprise that poor households are loath to allocate meagre resources as monetary investments in their daughters given that they are unlikely to see much return on the said investment.

The large gender-wage gap in the labour market along with the expectation (and practice) of girls helping out with household chores and childcare means that if faced with a choice between their sons’ and daughters’ education, parents are more likely to send their sons to school.

So how can we help families escape this poverty-inequality trap? There are several measures that can be taken at the state and household levels.

At the state level there is dire need for better provision of public safety nets, particularly support during old age, as well as improving labour market conditions for women. While the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill 2009 is a meaningful step, its enforcement is yet to be seen. Some other areas that the government can focus on include the establishment of technical and vocational training institutes for women, provision of childcare facilities at the workplace and equal pay acts directly aimed at tackling issues of discrimination against working women.

Within the household itself empirical evidence suggests that mothers, more so than fathers, spend resources to close any existing gaps between sons and daughters. Thus, providing cash transfers to mothers or enhancing their income through greater market returns on female occupations and/or female-owned farms has a higher probability of improving the achievement levels of the female child.

The major issue in this regard is that access to income by mothers does not imply control over these resources and that control in turn is a function of the position of the mother within the household. The solution lies in the educational achievement of mothers since this has been shown to significantly impact women’s say in household decision-making as well as their ability to control their own income.

Thus a concerted push towards better educational outcomes of girls is imperative. This can be achieved by making cash-transfer programmes conditional on school attendance of daughters, the establishment of easily accessible all-girls’ schools that allow students some flexibility in hours so that they can still help with housework as well as the introduction of small cash rewards to all students who pass a grade.

Cash-transfer programmes, improved access to education and even asset redistribution policies in favour of women are all examples of investments in individuals. On the other hand an overhaul of public safety nets and labour markets represent investments in systems.

While there is need to devote resources to both individual and systemic aspects, developing economies such as Pakistan are pressed for funds. Furthermore, the lack of a clear mandate means that any available funds are ill-utilised, resulting in little or no progress on either front.

Looking at countries that have exhibited progress in eliminating gender inequality, the one thing that they all have in common is an expansion in the set of labour-market opportunities for women. Once women’s earning capacities improve, not only is the economic imperative driving parents to spend resources in favour of boys removed but women also have substantially more freedom with regard to decision-making.

Thus, if Pakistan must make a choice about where to invest its development funds, it should choose in favour of fixing labour-market inequalities. After all, it is the inability of women to make their own life choices that is the root of many of the injustices they suffer.

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