**The gender gap**

Naurah Khurshid

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The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report for this year places Pakistan second last out of 146 countries in terms of gender parity.

According to the report, based on the progress made to close the gender gap in South Asia, it will take another 197 years to reach gender parity. Pakistan is consistently ranked at the bottom among other countries in the region across various indicators.

The country’s depressing performance should be an eye-opening moment for the government as well as society as a whole. As a nation we are under the gross misconception, propagated from time to time by politicians and other privileged people, that women enjoy a unique status in Pakistan borne out of respect and honour. But the fact is that women are ‘respected’ as long as they are confined within the four walls of their homes. And even then, they are subjected to horrific physical, sexual and financial abuse by the men in their families. Every year, international reports pertaining to gender equality shatter our national misconceptions by placing Pakistan amongst the worst countries for women.

While we are quick to point out measures taken to increase women’s participation in the workforce, such as women’s quota in the civil service, very little effort is made to ensure that workplaces are female friendly.

According to the report, Pakistan still ranks at the bottom in terms of women’s participation in senior management and legislative roles. The state may have increased women’s selection in civil service through a quota, but very few women manage to secure prize postings and even fewer make it to the top. Besides some government offices lacking the most basic facilities for women, the work culture is designed to facilitate men who can stay at the office as late as they want without worrying about household responsibilities. Married women, especially those who have children, are not even in the running for competitive positions and lose out to their male colleagues who may even be less qualified.

In terms of economic participation and opportunity, Pakistan ranks second from the bottom and 135th in the educational attainment category. Pakistan is among the lowest scoring countries globally for health and survival. The Global Gender Gap report reflects the country’s dismal statistics related to women across all walks of life. According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-2018, 3.3 per cent of girls were married before the age of 15 and 18.3 per cent before the age of 18. The fact that child marriage is still accepted in the country is alarming. Child marriages have a severely adverse impact on girls’ education, their health, reproductive choices and economic opportunities. Girls who are married off as children are more vulnerable to domestic violence as well. It should not be surprising then that the country is ranked so low in the Global Gender Gap Index.

While Pakistani women are struggling for economic, education and healthcare equality, they are also being let down by the judicial system. Not only are crimes against women underreported, criminals often get away with assaulting or even murdering women. According to some estimates the conviction rate in rape cases is as low as three per cent. For a country that believes its society and culture honours women as mothers, sisters, and daughters, the extent of abuse that the average Pakistani woman faces on a daily basis at home and in public is astounding. Lawmakers place emphasis on women-friendly legislation from time to time but the enforcement of these laws presents a different set of challenges altogether.

Women’s rights activists in Pakistan are often subjected to ridicule for not raising their voices about the ‘real’ issues that women face in the country. They are dismissed for being too angry, or too selective in their outrage. For example, Aurat March has been called foreign-funded, anti-Pakistan, anti-Islam, and anti-women by lawmakers, social media influencers and powerful media personalities. The manifesto published by Aurat March demands policymaking in all those areas where Pakistan has consistently lagged behind other countries in the region as reflected in the Global Gender Gap report.

When women’s rights activists demanded reproductive rights and body autonomy, their slogans resulted in an uproar and invited rape and death threats on social media. These basic rights were considered against Pakistani culture and religion. However, no one bats an eye when gender gap reports place Pakistan at the very bottom globally in terms of health and security.

The same people who dismiss women’s rights activism will remain apathetic to how their country, it’s culture and society treat women. The family structure that is so religiously defended and upheld is built upon the exploitation and abuse of women for generations and this is reflected in multiple national and international gender related statistics. Pakistan’s respect for women is unfortunately a figment of imagination of those who do not want to see radical cultural and institutional change in the way women are treated in the country.

The writer is a former civil servant.