**Welcome gender lens**

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WORDS have power. Say something often enough, and it will manifest. This is why, despite the mounting, valid critique, Pakistan`s first-ever National Security Policy should be commended. `The security of Pakistan rests in the security of its citizens.

These are the words with which the prime minister introduce d the policy. Not the army, not the border with India, not the nuclear arsenal. This paradigm shift will inevitably make security and broader policy discourse in Pakistan more productive.

Admittedly, we`re starting from a low bar when we must celebrate the fact that people are at the centre of a national security policy.

But that`s how it is. And that`s why, as a Pakistani woman, I`m particularly heartened to see gender security highlighted within the policy.

The document rightly acknowledges that `no security policy can be successful unless it adopts a gendered lens to achieving peace and security ... providing women and transgender persons a safe environment at home, in public spaces, and at the worl(place are priorities for the country`. The policy also calls for women and transgender people to participate freely and securely in all avenues of public life, and calls for protection from gender-based violence.

The two paragraphs on gender security are a huge leap forward, but could be taken even further. Gender security must be more robustly integrated across national security considerations.

By giving more space to women, the policy would likely have deflected much of the critique it is now facing. For example, the policy has been criticised for failing to put a strong democracy at the heart of security considerations and, in fact, for exhibiting disdain for the political system by failing to air this `citizen-centric` policy before the citizens` representatives. This angle could not have been missed if women`s increased political participation was recognised as key to their security.

Women`s political participation and involvement in conflict prevention and management and security policymaking is known to result in more stable outcomes.

This is not only because women advocate more effectively for gender (and, hence, community) security, but also because they disrupt entrenched political elites, and push for more liberal, inclusive and so more resilient agendas. Research has shown that greater female representation leads to reduced corruption and improved public service delivery which, as the policy notes, are key to addressing deep-seated socioeconomic grievances that drive conflict.

A more consistent gender lens would have highlighted the overlaps between seeminglydiverse threats. For example, violent extremism and digital security threats have direct implications for women`s security, and by tackling one you can also better tackle the other. Indeed, an expanded review of gender security would have led to a better articulation of the multifaceted challenge Pakistan faces from religious extremists.

An in-depth consideration of women`s security would also have nuanced the policy`s depiction of `sub-nationalist` movements. These are dismissed as fringe concerns, troublemakers funded by external hostile actors. But the term presumably encompasses long-standing ethno-political movements that endure because of what the policy itself terms as `horizontal` inequalities, the systemic exclusion from politics and resource allocation of many Pakhtuns, Baloch and Sindhis. Recent protests, for example in Gwadar, have comprised largely of women asking for the basics: water, electricity, fishing rights, etc. These are not fringe concerns.More emphasis on women`s security would also have allowed for better consideration of nontraditional threats.

Writing in these pages, Ali Taugeer Sheikh has pointed out that the policy neglected Pakistan`sclimate vulnerabilities. Climate change impacts more than infrastructure. The effects of climate change make women more insecure as they have to travel farther distances during drought to procure water, and are subject to increased levels of harassment and violence during times of food scarcity or during evacuations etc. There is no gender security (or national security) without climate change adaptation.

The policy`s critics say that it makes human security subservient to economic and ultimately territorial security. The critique is fair, but given the securitised history of all policymaking in Pakistan, it`s better to have public safety and prosperity prioritised in a security framework, than not at all. However, in this context too, the policy misses a trick by not highlighting the key role that women (if provided basic security) will play in boosting the country`s economy.

The policy should also focus on women`s inclusion in the workforce, including a target for formal labour participation. Such details would ensure that the rhetoric is implemented, and that citizens are truly made more secure. The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

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