**The gender gap**

BY A N U M M A L K A N I | 1/13/2020

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| DURING a recruitment drive at a company I once worked with, my colleagues and I debated which questions are appropriate to ask in an interview. I was of the opinion that personal questions should be off limits. For example, a female candidate should not be asked whether she is married a common practice in job interviews in Pakistan. If she is not, the assumption is that she will be soon and resign. If she is, the assumption is that she will soon have children and resign.  Either way, she is unlikely to be hired.  When I made my case, some of my male colleagues let out a sigh of exasperation: `everything is not a women`s rights issue`.  This is now a common refrain among men who are inexplicably fatigued by the women`s rights movement. They believe that feminism has run its course and women are now equal nay, dominant. In this posttruth world, men are now victims of misandry and gender discrimination.  Look up online career discussion forums and men not just here, but all over the world are complaining that employers favour women. They are convinced that af firmative action has gone too far and mediocre women are being hired over more deserving men. It does not matter that the facts gender ratios and pay gaps in most workplaces are abysmal disprove this theory. Nor does it occur to them that a woman`s skill and intellect may play a part when she is hired over a man. The myth that prevails among such men puts on stark display their unshakeable belief that they are better.  This also manifests in conferences around Pakistan. Panels or `manels`are heavily male-dominated. At a recent panel on an economic issue, the sole female panellist bravely began her talk by calling out the lack of female representation. Rather than being applauded for her courageous stand, she was severely denigrated.  While some belittled her `just another woman throwing a tantrum` and others vehemently defended their right to hold a `manel`, they were all in denial of the systemic and structural issues that prevent women from participating. Some insisted that they could not find a woman with the relevant expertise (I could name several) while others said that if it had been on a subject relevant to women (as though the economy is irrelevant to 50 per cent of the population), they would have invited female panelists. But even this is not true. Even on panels on women`s issues, men are considered the authority and women are excluded, as evidenced by the initially proposed all-male panel on feminism at the Arts Council in Karachi.  Another common refrain in the wake of the #MeToo movement is `we can`t say anything anymore` as though women, highon their newfound power, are brazenly accusing men of sexual harassment without any grounds. This too is defeated by facts.  First, the idea that women use false harassment claims as weapons against men belies reason. The weapon would be a rather impotent one, given that women rarely win such cases and often suffer serious personal, professional and reputational damage. Second, the idea that men are being silenced and cannot say anything lest they be accused of harassment is dubious. I have never found myself, while conversing with a man, uncertain about whether I am sexually harassing him. The lines are clear. If in doubt, assume there is something wrong with what you are about to say or do, and invest in sensitivity training.  The reality is that, while there has been some progress, the status quo prevails, and women continue to lag behind. Professionally, women are suffering as workplace gender ratios are abysmal and get worse further up the ladder. Financially, they are disempowered with a big gender gav in finan-cial inclusion.  Health and literacy outcomes are worse for women.  Violence against women remains prevalent, and the abuse spewed against women on social media is a revealing indica-tor of our misogynist society. Unsurprisingly, Pakistan performs miserably in UN gender indices, and the World Economic Forum estimates that, based on current trends, it will take 257 years to close the global Economic Participation and Opportunity gender gap.  There is a deep nostalgia among Pakistani men for the good old days when there were no repercussions, no women`s marches, few women in workplaces and even fewer in positions of power. The idea that feminism has overachieved and women now have too many rights is a dangerous myth which only helps strengthen this status quo.  The Guardian columnist Nesrine Malik refers to such myths as `hierarchy stabilisers` diverting attention `from the fact that there is someone above you who is either exploiting you, or enjoying more unearned privileges than you`. The truth this myth obfuscates is that, with or without male allies, there are many causes to fight and a long, difficult road to travel before we can claim equality.  The writer is a development and technology policy consultant.  anummalkani@gmail.com |