**US Aid for Gender Equality**

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On December 22, for the fiscal year of 2023, the Senate of the United States (US) passed a $ 1.7 trillion omnibus spending package, including $200 million for promoting gender equality in Pakistan.

This amount is 20 times more than the amount allocated for Pakistan in December 2020 ($10 million) for the fiscal year 2021. It means that the US has seen some hope in empowering women to develop Pakistan by spending the US taxpayers’ money, instead of pumping dollars into Pakistan’s military machine.

Pakistan has enough tanks, missiles and combat planes to fight a war. Pakistan needs to develop its social sector to provide health, education and employment to its population, which crossed the figure of 230 million in 2022, as per the Worldometer-based data compiled by the United Nations. In principle, Pakistan should take cognizant of its growing population and correspondingly deteriorating social sector. Nevertheless, the Pakistanis are busy cleaning the stability of the hybrid regime. Hence, outlanders should take care of Pakistan’s social sector.

Gender equality means the provision of equal access to resources and opportunities to both genders, female and male. In Pakistan’s society, the challenge is how to offer equal access to resources and opportunities to females. This is why the US aid is both relevant and vital.

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The news has come at a critical time of financial deficiency ravaging the country, which is reeling under the peril of financial bankruptcy called default. Pakistan’s expenditures have outgrown its earnings. The situation went worse after 2017.

To growing economic insufficiency, the major response has emerged from the middle class, which has accelerated the process of sending their children to foreign countries for studying and living a better life. The meaning of better life is to have a life that ensures equal opportunities to work and progress and safeguards the security of the future. Migrating to other countries, be they developed ones, has been painful, but there is left no choice for the professional and skilled youth to opt for that.

According to the Bureau of Emigration, 92,000 professionals (doctors, engineers, accountants and information technology experts) have so far emigrated from Pakistan in 2022. Indeed, this is an alarming figure of brain drain.

The question is why Pakistan has been short of meeting the expectations of professionals and skilled labourers. One answer lies in economic insufficiency sprouting from political instability or uncertainty. Another answer sprouts from the inefficiency of governments to address the issue of gender equality. On the front of gender equality, Pakistan has been making strides. On May 22, 2007, the Federal Government announced to reserve a 10 per cent quota for employment of women to all posts across the board in Federal Government Services including the Civil Service to be filled by direct recruitment, in addition to their participation in the open merit. The step enhanced the participation of women in Central Superior Services of Pakistan.

Women, however, cannot avail themselves of the right to gender equality if they are subjected to workplace harassment. If women have to go out of their homes to work in the domain traditionally monopolized by men, the workplace should not be hostile to women. This is the standard to meet which, on January 14, 2022, Pakistan’s Parliament amended the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010, and adopted the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Amendment) Act 2022, which expanded the definition of the workplace to include both formal and informal ones.

The next question is who will implement the law. This is a testing area. On June 10, 2022, Pakistan’s electronic media aired the interview of a lady, Tayyaba Farooq Gul, who narrated the way she was harassed sexually by Justice (retired) Javed Iqbal in his office. After getting retired from the Supreme Court, Justice Iqbal served as Chairman of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). The victim lady also produced some video clips which she happened to record secretly through her mobile phone to show the Pakistanis the challenge she had faced on the path to finding justice.

The story of victimhood is an eye-opener and discouraging for women who think that the law is available to protect them. When a retired judge and Chairman NAB can stoop so low, no law of the land can rescue a woman. The message is that a person of high stature is not answerable to the law.

Justice Iqbal is still out of the ambit of accountability. He had committed a heinous crime of sexual harassment of a woman in his office. On the ground, outside the documents enshrining the law against women harassment, this is real Pakistan. Males sitting in mighty offices are above the law. If this happens to one woman, the same can happen to another woman. More males can be encouraged to exploit their high offices to victimize women and go scot-free. Implications are disastrous for society. This is how the issue is of immense public importance.

In Lahore’s buses, be they speedo or metro, an advertisement catches everybody’s attention: Section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code defines sexual harassment which is prohibited not only at the workplace but also in private spaces such as home and public spaces such as streets, buses, markets and parks. Offenders will be punished. The speedo-metro project was introduced by Shahbaz Sharif, who is now Pakistan’s Prime Minister (PM). Woefully, PM Sharif is still silent and inactive on the implementation of the law to provide justice to the victim lady. The problem with Pakistan is that its political leaders get compromised the moment they enter the corridors of power. They pass certain laws to woo voters and not to implement them. It is the US that is concerned about gender equality in Pakistan. This is the reason why professionals and skilled workers prefer to leave Pakistan for seeking a better future in countries where governments are strong enough to protect the rights of their citizens and where women are protected against incidents of harassment.

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