**Choice and challenges- happy IWD 2021**

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The International Women’s Day (IWD) in theory does not belong to any one particular country, region or organization. The ideological ownership does transcend boundaries and borders. However, in materiality its control is caged in certain visible and invisible hands. The lexicon, mood, gestures and poses to reflect feminism and solidarity with the rights of women are hence predetermined and drafted. This may be an administrative limitation or prerequisite of those who run the show as power platforms for steering and leading the conversations and conclusions on overall development agenda . It could be a sheer coincidence or an outcome of detachment from the disadvantaged communities by the leaders in the decision making corridors.

Like all years this year too the IWD has a specific theme for campaign and that is “choose to challenge”. While completely believing in therectitude of intents of those who created this, I could not help escaping an ironic flavour -though subtle in this theme. Anyone who has worked solely or largely with the power of passion rather than money,with women in multiple miserable settings and conditions need not to be informed about limited if not zero choices available and accessible to their vast majority. The very idea of choice is so alien to them and so threatening to the custodians and nurturers of patriarchy.

Empowerment if self-earned, in any purview (personal, psychological, political or professional) is a taxing process and embodies a cost

It would be unfair not to mention and acknowledge that the collective efforts of many technical and aid agencies, civil society organizations, media, activists , progressive legislators within governments and political parties have forged some successes in the mainstreaming of the concepts of feminism, gender equality and inclusion. More representation of women or atleast the desire for their greater representation is seen incertain policies, programs and laws. One cannot ignore improved optics regarding freedom and emancipation of women. However, it would be equally unfair if any honest observer of the landscape of the social development could miss out the fact that to achieve inclusivity and reaching the most in need first the processes are not only slow, rather too slow ,but not flawless either. The politics of aids, biased budgeting and mismatched allocation of resources are some key complimentary factors in this connection.The entire discourse of enabling women has become a dialogue between a certain classes and age groups aimed at the professional growth and gains of some women and men only. This has not only principally harmed and sidelined many marginalized groups of women but many issues of concern too, that do not attract donors’ funds and likes on social media.

If I have to develop a quick list of such issues for the globe I would include in equal order of priority, ageism against competent women, benevolent sexism at business, weak mechanisms to address harassment at work places and multilayered biases and injustices in human resource management practices of institutions that claim to be the champions of gender equality and women rights. Talking of the homeland, I would add to the list two specific forms of gender-violence. One is the institutionalization of dowry systems and the other is ableism leading to many injustices and inequalities. The negligence, apathy and unembarrassed elitist consensus on dowry violence in Pakistan is remarkable. One becomes speechless on finding a strong lobby to protect commercial interests, promote expensive bridal dresses, big fat weddings and prevent any tough law against dowry demand and criminalizing dowry violence. The disdain for women who are physically, mentally and culturally (divorced, abandoned wives or never married) disabled has attained an unapologetic normative status. There is no serious and structured intervention to identify their ordeals and remedial actions. Cosmetic actions in the name of short-term funding for ad hoc projects that too for a handful of non-profits or those having push of the social class is not a solution.

In today’s world the progress and prosperity of countries is not only measured through their GNP but through their development in the areas of health, education and economy and the gender parity in these broader domains. Inclusion (economic, social, political); justice (formal laws and informal discrimination); and security (at the family, community, and societal levels) are deemed as three fundamental visages of women’s welfare. The George Washington Institute of Women , Peace and Security have captured and quantified 11 indicators for the well-being of women and aggregated these indicators at the national level to create a global ranking of 167 countries in its reports. According to their latest report (launched in 2020), the 7 top performers on WPS index are Norway, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark , Iceland, Austria and UK while the 7 worst performers included Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan ,South Sudan, Iraq and DRC . The local think tanks and research organizations should objectively,recheck the ranking of the motherland. A collaboration with international bodies that release such data is essential to understand the process of data collection and computation. Meanwhile it is evenly crucial to look at the ground realities with intersectionality lens and employ ethical research. This is an inevitable condition to calibrate the progress of the SDG 5. The overall coherence of different policies related to social protection and uplifting of women also needs this form of monitoring.

Empowerment if self-earned, in any purview( personal, psychological, political or professional )is a taxing process and embodies a cost. On this IWD, I wonder how many of us have the courage to choose to challenge the inequalities and deceitfulness that are not listed in the given menus of carefully designed posters, fireside chats, networking events, colourful galas, panel discussions and marches?