**Dear Pakistani women: you are not welcome**

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In what now seems a firm pattern, Pakistan plummeted down near the absolute bottom in the recent Global Gender Gap report published by the World Economic Forum.

The report shows progress on closing the gap between men and women across four pillars: economic participation, education, health and political empowerment. Pakistan ranks 145th out of 146 countries, beating Afghanistan. Last year, Pakistan ranked 153rd out of 156 countries. It will take 197 years for South Asia to close the gender gap. This is the worst performing region in the entire world. What we live and expected just came out in black and white – Pakistan is a terrible country for women. The only place, in the world, that is worse for women is Afghanistan.

Pakistan has managed to close the gender gap by 56.4 per cent. This is momentous by Pakistani standards, but still an international embarrassment. The report is measured in terms of gaps, and not of levels. This makes international comparisons possible. The idea is to report the gap to a country’s existing resources by its people. This is important because comparing levels puts the Global South at a disadvantage as it has less resources. Measuring gaps also makes assessing the developed world easier as despite a multifold excess of resources there, the gender gap exists. Not a single country in the world has achieved gender parity – although Iceland is close and sits at the top of the gender gap ranking.

Compared to global averages, Pakistan lags behind on every single pillar. The worst performance is on economic participation and opportunity. Pakistan bottoms out on labor force participation and the income gap between men and women. That makes sense. Of all the women that could be working, only 21.4 per cent work, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. Most women in Pakistan are employed in the agriculture sector where the pay gap is high. The nature of work that women do is hard labour and mostly unskilled work. On the other end of the spectrum, fewer women are seen in senior and managerial positions. There are more women in low-paying jobs, and fewer women in high-paying jobs – amounting to a rising gender gap. While Pakistani women’s income, in relation to men, has gone up by less than five per cent this past year, such incremental changes cannot meaningfully reduce the gender gap.

Women’s representation in the domain of legislators, senior officials and managers in Pakistan is abysmal. Things are a little better in the domain of professional and technical workers.

The state of affairs renders one speechless. We see this reality unfold every day in our lives. We see the sort of jobs women are offered, we see very few of them in the formal sector but a disproportionate amount of them in the informal sector. The informal sector offers next to no legal and organizational protection and no health insurance. Yet, when one sees the reality painted in black and white in international comparisons, it is heartbreaking. Women and men in Pakistan appear to work very hard and then we learn that women here are only better off than women in Afghanistan. Other things start making more sense. Like the 16.5 million Pakistanis that have left Pakistan in the previous decade, in search of better economic opportunities; if there ever was a wakeup call.

How do we ensure a Pakistan that works for half of its population? We need to get more women working and we need to create better jobs for them. Now, before we do that, we also need the economy to grow – which it won’t for the next couple of years on account of the structural reforms underway. But after the reform there is a tiny window to improve things. That’s when we get women to work.

We literally need to get women to work, which means mobility is key. Public transport needs to be looked at and scaled up yesterday. Let’s put a pin in the rainbow coloured train lines and increase the number of buses and routes. For just a heartbeat, if we can actually plan routes according to actual need rather than political needs, we might just be able to make things work. Workplaces need to be safer for women. The sort of work done by FOSPAH is commendable and should be lauded. It also needs to be scaled up with presence down to the district level. Fertility in Pakistan needs to come down from a whopping 3.45 children per female to 2.3. This can only be done by mass information campaigns, and access to timely and safe family planning. Evidence shows that the Lady Health Workers scheme is one of the most successful interventions in Pakistan. Scale up what works.

There needs to be a seismic shift in norms and attitudes towards women. We can begin by ensuring swift justice in family courts and other crimes committed against women. While an average Pakistani waits for months, if not years, to have their day in court, the elite get theirs in a matter of days. This has to stop. The number of women in ministerial and cabinet positions needs to increase to represent the actual number of women in the country. Also, stop mainstreaming violence against women in television dramas.

If we don’t do this and more, we will leave half the country behind. You cannot win a race designed for two legs by hopping on one.

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