**Empowered women, empowered nation**

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Pakistan, a nation striving for a more robust and inclusive democracy, faces the crucial challenge of harnessing the full potential of its citizenry. While significant strides have been made, women’s participation in governance, particularly at the local level, remains an underutilized resource.

We argue that empowering women in local governance is not just a moral imperative, but a strategic necessity for strengthening Pakistan’s democratic infrastructure.

Local governance, encompassing issues like sanitation, education, and healthcare, directly impacts the lives of ordinary citizens. Women, often the primary caregivers within families and communities, possess an intimate understanding of these local needs.

Their inclusion in decision-making processes ensures policies and programmes that are responsive to the specific challenges faced by women, children and families.

Examples from around the world underscore the positive impact of women in local governance. In Rwanda, a country that tragically emerged from genocide, women now hold over 60 per cent of parliamentary seats. This remarkable achievement has seen a tangible focus on social welfare programmes, including healthcare initiatives targeting women and children.

Pakistan can learn from neighbouring countries that are making significant strides in promoting women’s political participation. Bangladesh, for instance, has seen a steady rise in women’s representation in local councils, leading to increased spending on education and healthcare.

In Afghanistan, despite recent challenges, women’s rights activists continue their fight for inclusion in the political process, recognizing the importance of their voices in shaping the nation’s future. Similarly, in India, reserved seats for women in local panchayats (village councils) have led to increased payout on education and sanitation projects, areas traditionally neglected by male-dominated bodies.

Pakistan has taken some positive steps towards women’s inclusion in local governance. The Local Government Act mandates a 33 per cent quota for women’s representation in local councils. However, the reality paints a more complex picture. Cultural norms, societal bias, and a lack of support structures often prevent women from effectively participating or even contesting elections, resulting in little to no women’s engagement at the local government level.

A concrete plan to address these challenges and unlock the potential of women in local governance is crucial. This can be achieved via extensive awareness campaigns, targeting both men and women, which are crucial to dispel myths and encourage women to participate in the political process.

Educational programmes can equip women with the knowledge and skills needed for effective leadership, public speaking and campaign management. Training programmes can equip women with the necessary skills in governance, budgeting, and project management. Mentorship programmes, connecting experienced women politicians with aspiring leaders, can provide invaluable guidance and support.

Ensuring the physical safety of women during campaigning and while holding office is also paramount. This requires robust security measures and awareness programmes for law-enforcement personnel. Rigorous enforcement of the 33 per cent quota for women’s representation is essential.

Support structures, such as childcare facilities and flexible working hours, can enable women to balance their political responsibilities with family commitments close together. Supporting and amplifying the voices of women’s rights organizations and local civil society groups working to promote women’s leadership is crucial.

Local governance strengthens democracy in several ways for women. They bring diverse perspectives to the decision-making table, ensuring policies are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all citizens.

Studies suggest that women leaders are more likely to be transparent and less susceptible to corruption. Women often prioritize social welfare programmes that benefit the entire community, fostering greater social cohesion and stability. When women actively participate in political processes, it sets a powerful example for future generations, encouraging a more inclusive and participatory democracy.

On International Women’s Day, the theme ‘Invest in women: Accelerate progress’ rings true for local governance. Empowering women at the local level unlocks a talent pool, diverse perspectives, and deep community understanding.

Pakistan can create an environment where women can thrive as leaders, shaping a more vibrant, inclusive, and truly democratic future. Pakistan’s success in this endeavour holds immense significance beyond its borders. It can serve as a powerful example for other nations striving to strengthen their democracies and harness the full potential of their citizenry.

Empowering women in local governance is not just a matter of rights; it is a strategic investment in a brighter future for all.

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