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**Empowering women**

Gender equality is considered a vital factor in determining the overall wellbeing and growth of a nation, country and a society.

Gender equality is when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. The Sustainable Development Goal No 5 talks about achieving “gender equality and empowering all women and girls”.

In addition to SDG 5, there are gender-related targets in other goals pertaining to health, education, water and sanitation, cities and human settlements, climate change, economic growth, peaceful and inclusive societies as well as ending hunger and poverty. It is important to take steps to ensure gender equality and women empowerment. A McKinsey research series on ‘Women Matter’ has found that representation of women in public as well as private sector organizations improves performance due to such diversity challenging conventional thinking and leading to more dynamic discussion and better decision-making.

According to this study, low participation rate is mainly due to lack of gender sensitive policies, income inequality, attitude and harassment at the workplace, and certain stereotypes determining women’s role in society. Apart from that, non- availability of pro-gender infrastructure at workplaces, gender pay gaps, limited mobility, discrimination of professional development and leadership opportunities, lack of job security and other professional hazards are some of the additional barriers towards gender equality and women empowerment.

These challenges have now been aggravated by the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has unstretched new obstacles to building inclusive and prosperous economies and societies. Gender gaps that already existed have augmented and magnified the crises disproportionately between men and women, though women, as essential workers, have been at the frontlines of managing the crisis.

The majority of women in Pakistan work in the non-formal sector, where they work for long hours with low wages, no benefits and no job security.

According to the recently published Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Pakistan ranked 153rd out of 156 countries as per gender parity index. The report is based on the latest international statistics and survey compiled by the World Economic Forum. The report is used as a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender based- disparities and tracking progress overtime. The report combines gender-related parameters of economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment to reach a country-by-country assessment of gender gap and achievement.

There is a great deal of evidence that societies that discriminate on the basis of gender pay a price in more poverty, slower growth, and a lower quality of life, whereas gender equality enhances development. Empowered women and girls can become a powerful force and contribute to the well-being of their families and communities. The nonexistence of gender equality entails enormous loss of human potential as well as for development.

For societies to flourish and prosper, women and girls, men and boys must have equal access to all opportunities. It is vitally important to promote the rights of all individuals. However, women are central to development. They control most of the non-money economy through bearing and raising children, and through providing much of the labour for household maintenance and subsistence agriculture. Women also make an important contribution to the money economy by their work in both the formal and informal sectors, but these roles are often ignored.

It is critical to address the structural causes of gender inequality, such as violence against women, economic empowerment, decent workplace environment, skill development, resource mobilization, etc. This requires not just vision and will, but also proactive and focused measures. From a more practical perspective, the present government of Balochistan has taken several significant measures that promote social inclusion, gender equality and women empowerment.

To begin with, key initiatives such as pro-women legislation to address sexual and gender-based violence, establishment of women empowerment centers, graduate girls’ internship programme and construction of working women’s hostels have already been taken. Also, business and incubation centers for women are being established to offer women startups and entrepreneurs a platform to enhance their skills, build their businesses, showcase their products and connect with the markets.

Further, the government of Balochistan has introduced laws and policies that support and encourage women and girls to play an active role in all spheres of society. The newly approved gender equality and women empowerment policy (2020-2024) will lead to inclusive and holistic development in the province. It is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals to create an enabling environment. The policy is likely to serve as a key document for strengthening institutions such as the Balochistan Commission on the Status of Women, Women Parliamentary Caucus, Women Economic Empowerment Council and Ombudsperson for Protection Against Harassment at Workplace.

In addition, sufficient funds have been allocated for the Women’s Development Sector in the Annual Development Programme 2021-22. Several new projects such as women academies, digital libraries, women empowerment centers, baby daycare centers, women facilitation wards and early learning centers for children, renovation of women barracks in district prisons and women economic empowerment fund have been included. These initiatives by the government of Balochistan are very important protecting women rights and giving them an important role in the socio-economic pyramid.

Gender equality does not necessarily mean equal numbers of men and women or girls and boys in all spheres of life, nor does it necessarily mean treating them in the same way. It means nurturing and developing a society where women and men are able to lead equally fulfilling lives. The primary purpose of gender equality is to appreciate and acknowledge that men and women often have different priorities and needs, face different constraints and have different aspirations.

Gender equality and women empowerment cannot be achieved without conscious efforts. Education and awareness are crucial. Pakistan’s development potential will remain unmet if half of its citizens are excluded. It is now more important than ever to scale up gender responsive policies and practices.

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