**For an empowered woman**

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Fatima is one of the most popular names in Pakistan, named after the Prophet’s (pbuh) daughter. Fatima (a.s.) in history was a leader, an empowered woman who played vital roles in support of her father and afterwards to her family. She was a trusted woman. Therefore, she could do much and achieve extraordinarily; she was given an opportunity to learn, participate, and teach.

Girls in Pakistan deserve the opportunity to not only be empowered but also to help their family members and the local community. Two months ago, the media was awash with reports of a young girl in the flood-hit area in Sindh who was allegedly tortured and raped by men who kidnapped her on the pretext of giving her food rations. This is not an isolated case; women are at a higher risk of violence, especially when they get displaced in a humanitarian situation. Many of them report facing harassment.

These are but a few stories of Pakistani women and girls who frequently must contend with gender-based violence (GBV). However, the stories of resilience and courage are many too.

The recent history of Pakistan reveals that many women rose from being ordinary girls, experienced times of fear and hurt, but never gave up. These women continue to be an inspiration by showing courage and resilience. Such women and girls are assets to the nation. They, however, need as much support from all fronts: from within the families, communities, and society.

We all need to support the movement for women and girls to always enjoy their rights.

Recent research reveals that when women can take care of their health, all families become healthier. Lessons from history tell us that nations can achieve little unless their women and girls are free of violence, able to enjoy all their rights and contribute to building their nations. Women and girls should in no way be a missed opportunity for the economy and social welfare. All girls and women should be given an opportunity to learn, participate, and speak out. Girls should be encouraged to dream and be supported to step out to achieve their potential.

Empowered girls play vital roles in support of their fathers and, afterwards, their families. They are trusted women; therefore, they could do much and achieve extraordinarily. Every girl and woman should be able to confidently say: ‘I can be successful, I am not afraid to speak my mind, and I am free of all kinds of violence’.

They need everyone’s support to flourish and be allowed to live free from all forms of violence and discrimination, to be educated and to participate fully in the country’s development.

The 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence is a time to mobilize more people to show solidarity and support to end VAWG at a time when the world is facing pushback against women’s rights.

One major component of violence we must fight is child marriage which continues to deprive girls of access to education, good health services, and their ability to enjoy the power of choice. Recent research by the UNFPA revealed that the power of choice is remarkable. If women and girls are empowered to choose what to be, when to marry, and how much and when to have children, all other demographic and development indicators develop naturally and in a balanced manner which will save billions of dollars that governments have to invest in fixing demographic and development indicators.

Empowering girls and women is not a women's affair; it is everybody's business and the duty of all sectors because a nation with empowered women free of violence is a nation without missed opportunities which is in the interest of all stakeholders.

A prosperous nation is a nation where its women say confidently: ‘we are successful, not afraid, and can speak our minds’ -- and this sits well with all men and women.

Today, and always, is the time to ensure that interventions for the prevention, mitigation, and response to GBV are implemented and receive priority attention.

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