**How to empower women**

Anum Mufti

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Buzz words such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘equality’ are often part of the development discourse regarding women in today’s world – although there is no general consensus on what these terms truly mean.

And, since their meaning is vague, so are the actions taken that come in the form of development initiative for women. Often, these initiatives forget the very fact that these interventions are meant to challenge the current status quo, instead of reinforcing the prevalent injustices.

One such example is the idea of empowering women by making them part of productive labour. Inherently, the thought is not flawed in itself. But if one has the eye to see beyond the apparent, the materiality of working women is not different from women who are not part of paid labour. If anything, it is worse. The underlying reason is that women are not seen as equal to men – neither within their homes nor outside. These interventions fail to challenge the pervasive nature of unequal gender-relations in Pakistani society.

The gravity of the situation is better understood when we see that development initiatives focused on women are more concentrated on welfare in relation to reproductive labour and not equally as much for productive labour. And where we do intervene to enhance women’s capabilities by providing them education, the planning agencies are unable to align them with the opportunities open to them. This results in labour surplus, making way for wage exploitation. Not to forget that women are seen as secondary breadwinners, and therefore their take-home salary is treated as supplementary and not equal to their male counterparts.

It is also crucial to take into account that, according to the World Bank, about 12.5 per cent of Pakistani households are female -headed. The real numbers may be higher, since families generally do not want to reveal that they are headed by females due to cultural reasons. This point is the best to explain wage inequality and the scant number of opportunities available to women, not to forget several social norms working against them.

Lack of government security makes their condition unimaginably hard as well. An example of such inequality can be seen in the calculation of EOBI funds. It is also important to keep in mind that most women work in the informal sector, which means that EOBI is not an option for them anyway. Moreover, a majority of women are unable to save money since the wages they earn are meagre, and there are also high levels of lack of financial awareness among women. It is also true that most women seldom have agency over their earnings, and their income is mostly managed by male members of the family.

Along with their inability to save for the rainy days, women are also unable to have the security of owning any property. Since they mostly do not have access to loan facilities and do not possess the ability to purchase a home with their meagre income, they fail to own a house. In rare cases, where one is lucky enough to gather a sum to purchase a piece of land or a house, they are incapable of buying any property directly under their name. The reason lies again in the culture of male dominance and lack of agency.

It is also worth considering that women lack the right social capital, primarily due to their limited mobility and the fact that they cannot operate at their own will. Men, however, have the freedom to build connections, explore new avenues and possess the ability to make decisions without any external interference and therefore have more opportunities open to them.

Moreover, the way our culture is designed, women tend to seek continuous validation for who they are, who they should be and what they do. It makes it all the more menacing for them to survive. If a woman works, she has to justify her work. And, if she earns more than the man of the house, then as the feminist sociologist, Fran Ansley, puts it, she has to act as a sponge and absorb the man’s anger.

If she decides to have children and continue working, she is labelled as ‘not a good mother’ or has to prove herself as a ‘supermom’ by having to perfectly balance work inside and outside the house. It is interesting to note that even though the income that women are bringing to the table has changed enough, a shift towards more equal gender roles is not seen as a change that is worth considering. This is because their participation in productive labour is not an end in itself but a means to a patriarchal end.

Women have come a long way in their struggles to fight these injustices and they still have a long way to go. But as we celebrate increased women’s participation in productive labour, it becomes crucial to address and challenge the ubiquitous unequal gender relations existing in society.

Government initiatives geared towards helping to improve women’s position without challenging the underlying issue of unequal gender relations tend to have an adverse effect. Instead of empowering them, they further weaken women’s position. If we really wish to enhance women’s position in society, we have to start by bringing structural changes in the patriarchal mindset and treating them as equal humans.

If we can really bring that change, women’s quality of life will be made better. The government needs to assure that while it is enhancing the capabilities of women through development interventions, the culture of inequality needs to be challenged through open discourse and by creating awareness around gender sensitivity. Otherwise true women’s empowerment will never be achieved.

The writer is a lecturer at the Department of Architecture and Planning, NED University, Karachi. She can be reached at: anum.mufti@gmail.com