**Instilling hope**

BY H U M A Y U S U F 2021-03-08

THEY have been on the front line of protests against the military coup in Myanmar.

They took to the streets to say black lives matter. They have led sit-ins against India`s farm laws. They have been the face of successful recent protests in Algeria, Lebanon, Sudan and Belarus. Women around the world are adding power to civil protests and the trend is apparent in our own country too.

When women protest, power brokers should pay attention. Staunch proponents of gender equality may be uncomfortable with the suggestion that a female protester carries more symbolic and political heft.

Indeed, when equality is achieved, women who protest will have the same power, and face the same penalties, as men. But we do not yet inhabit this equal world. And where patriarchy endures, female protesters are inevitably more formidable.

The very inequality of societies means that a woman`s protest carries more meaning because it is done against odds, defying expectations and with serious consequences.

When women don`t protest, that means suppressive systems are stable. But when they take to the streets, it means the system has become untenable, and the consequences of speaking out are preferable to the status quo.

Protesting women reveal the extent of injustice, and force the majority to question their assumptions.

Protest movements that include women are more likely to succeed, according to research by Harvard professor Erica Chenoweth. Female participation means that movements are likely to stay non-violent for longer, and such movements are twice as likely to achieve their goals as violent campaigns. The presence of women builds non-violent movements` size and credibility: more segments of society are emboldened to join female protesters, and it is harder for states to dismiss them as lawbreakers, insurgents or traitors.

Research also shows that women are more effective organisers they are better at coordinating, collaborating, and remembering details key to movements` success.

Women are also good at exploiting gender expectations to increase the power of their protest. For example, women can shame riot police adopting a maternal position to protect a protest. In conservative contexts, they may form protective barriers around male protesters, leveraging the discomfort law enforcers may experience at the thought of having to (mis)handle female bodies.

Women can also draw on knowledge and experience gained through their gendered roles to identify where the system is most vulnerable to cracking. For example, the French Revolution was triggered by women who protested against soaring bread prices.

Similarly, women, typically tasked withshopping, were key to launching and sustaining the goods boycott within and beyond South Africa as part of the anti-apartheid movement.

Women`s protests should instil hope in the wider community as research studies have shown that they are more committed to ensuring that the next generation flourishes.

For example, when women earn money, they are more likely than men to spend it on nutritious food, education and healthcare with an eye to increasing their family`s resilience.

Similarly, a woman joining a protest is a sign that a movement`s goals are likely to benefit society.

Pakistani women`s participation in various movements is increasing in important ways. Women played a key role in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy against Ziaul Haq`s dictatorship. More recently, they have ensured that local women`s rights movement continues to gain momentum, with the Aurat March entering its fourth successive year and articulating clear demands, and the successful organi-sation of ad hoc protests against gender-based violence such as September`slarge rallies following the horrifying motorway gangr ape incident.More importantly, women are now a regular feature in broader rights movements, including those that highlight violations by state security forces. These range from sitins against enforced disappearances and sectarian killings to large rallies. The presence of Pakhtun women at PTM rallies, for example, has enhanced the movement`s resilience and validated its demands, particularly given the conservative context that they`re choosing to sidestep in order to participate.

One of the key reasons why movements with female participation do not quickly achieve their goals is because women get lef t out of the process that ensues to quell protests. When protest leaders and state representatives or other stakeholders engage in dialogue in an ef fort to address a movement`s demands, women are often left outside the room, no matter how central their role may be. This is how patriarchal structures undermine themselves, and delay progress. On this International Women`s Day, let`s hope that the door is left open for women who choose to protest their powerful voices demand a full hearing.  The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

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