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International Women's Day today



A woman on eve of Women's Day.—Photo by Mohsin Raza

By Awais Saleem

LAHORE: The countries around the world, including Pakistan, are observing International Women's Day 2006 today (Wednesday), under the theme 'women in decision-making: meeting challenges, creating change'. Since 1975, March 8

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has been celebrated as International Women's Day to commemorate the historic struggle to improve women's lives under the aegis of United Nations.

This day provides an opportunity to celebrate the progress made to advance equality for women and to assess the challenges that remain and also provides an opportunity to consider steps to bring about equality for women in all their diversity.

This year, several countries will be observing International Women's Week from March 5-11.

When women of all continents, often divided by national boundaries and by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, come together to celebrate their Day, they can look back to a tradition that represents at least nine decades of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development.

International Women's Day is the story of ordinary women as makers of history; it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate in society on an equal footing with men.

The idea of International Women's Day first arose at the turn of the century, which was a period of expansion and turbulence, booming population growth and radical ideologies in the industrialised world.

Over the years, UN action for the advancement of women has taken four clear directions: promotion of legal measures; mobilisation of public opinion and international action; training and research, including the compilation of gender desegregated statistics; and direct assistance to disadvantaged groups.

Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interest to be taken into account.

Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved.

available.

Even though women are increasingly well represented within professions such as law, medicine and engineering in developed countries; their participation at the decision-making level remains low.

According to data from the UN Economic Commission for Europe from 2001, even in developed countries, women constitute less than one-third of total employers.

While women's participation in parliaments is now the highest it has ever been, at 16.3 per cent across all parliaments, this represents only a marginal increase since 1975, when the participation rate was 10.9 per cent.

In many countries, women's share of low and middle-level positions within media organisations has risen over the last decade.

However, the number of women in senior decision-making positions remained very small, in both traditional media institutions of press, radio and television, and the newly emerging sectors of telecommunications, multimedia and e-media.

A study published by the International Federation of Journalists found that although one third of journalists today are women, less than three per cent of senior media executives and decision-makers are women.

Similarly, increasing number of women are graduating from universities and often with better results than men, women are not gaining secure employment in academia or receiving funding for research to the same extent as men.

The situation in Pakistan is also no different from elsewhere in the world.

The government has been boasting about the participation of women in every field for awareness and empowerment but the initiatives have largely remained cosmetic and the slogans are yet to be followed by concrete actions.

The most significant step taken by the present regime is the 33 per cent representation given to women in parliament but it has not reflected in the legislation carried out for women.

achieved.

By building strong foundations for leadership and strong networks, representing women's perspectives in decision-making circles, and seizing opportunities for change, women are meeting the challenges they face in creating the change necessary to achieve equality with men in decision-making at all levels.

A panel discussion on this topic will mark the United Nations official observance of International Women's Day on March 8, 2006.

The panel will bring together women of different regions who will illustrate how women in decision-making positions make a difference and create change.

Women's participation in high-level economic decision-making remains low even in the developed countries despite educational advances for women in many parts of the world.

According to ILO research from 2000 to 2002, women's overall share of managerial jobs ranged between only 20 and 40 per cent, in 48 out of the 63 countries, for which data were

women.

The women legislators have been found complaining about the lack of funds and cooperation in the discharge of their duties.

The government has also introduced Gender Reforms Action Plan (GRAP) at federal and provincial levels to increase quota of women in jobs as well as public sector spending on them but there has been no headway in this regard ever since. The situation of violation of human rights vis-à-vis women is as deplorable as ever and cases like Mukhtaran Mai, Dr Shazia and Sonia Naz keep creeping up every now and then as a blot on the face of the country at national and international level.

The government has shown little resolve to prevent this from happening and the hue and cry raised by the NGOs have mostly fallen flat on the ears of the powers that be. They will be holding several seminars this year as well to mark the occasion, in anticipation of substantial improvement in the condition of women in days and years to come.