**Invisible women**

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It is not the first time that PM Imran Khan has drawn the ire of women’s rights activists. This time, he assured clerics that no law that is incongruent to Islamic principles will be passed during his tenure. The two bills in question relate to anti-domestic violence and anti-forced conversion.

Supporters of this decision may consider it a move to protect the ‘family system’ and socio-cultural values of Pakistani society, but the possibility of it being a political move to appease the right-wing vote bank for the upcoming elections cannot be ignored. The latter seems more likely as for centuries the interests and rights of women have been used as pawns to broker political deals made by men.

The prevailing situation in Afghanistan serves as another example. Recently, a viral picture on social media showed American white men engaging with the Taliban to discuss women’s rights in Taliban-led Afghanistan. It is not even surprising that there were no women representatives in that room – after all, since time immemorial it has been men who have decided what women should and should not do. From women’s inalienable human rights, their right to vote, and their bodily autonomy and even sartorial choices, men have been at the helm of every decision that follows.

This entire development is inevitable as women are largely absent from the political landscape. In fact, fields like politics and international relations apparently may seem gender-neutral subjects, but in reality, they are so thoroughly masculinised that gender hierarchies are often hidden. Women and their voices are thus rendered irrelevant.

If one delves deeper into the theories of international relations and feminist criticism of them, it ultimately discloses the bitter reality of wars and conflicts and their adverse effects on women. History bears testimony that systematic rape has often been used as a weapon of war.

Contemporary conflicts are no different. The trade of Syrian brides in Turkey and sexual violence against women by Isis is on the rise due to never-ending conflicts in the Middle East; soldiers in Sudan have been permitted to rape women as a reward since they cannot be compensated monetarily. Similarly, the misogynistic remarks by Indian politicians against Kashmiri women following India’s annexation of Occupied Kashmir and forced public nudity as well as gang rapes in Burma amidst the Rohingya crisis are two glaring examples of how women are treated.

Even though the proliferation of technology has led to dramatic changes in the way wars are conducted today, the plight of women still persists. This is the direct consequence of the absence of women in making conflict- and peacekeeping-related policies.

Another issue is that women play a minimal role in national security and in formulating the policies related to it. Security policies are being formulated by the proponents of realism whose primary concern is the state and not individuals. Hence, national security often takes precedence over an individual’s security. Since national defence is considered strictly to be a male domain, experiences and voices of women are almost never counted in.

This has always been the case. Western political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and Machiavelli, whose writings still bear an influence over contemporary political realism, have also promoted misogynistic narratives. Machiavelli’s concept of ‘virtu’ and ‘fortuna’ is one such example. Another example is the gendered construction of Machiavelli’s citizen warrior whose concept is almost similar to R W Connell’s ‘hegemonic masculinity’. The liberal patriarchal system is barely any different, and even liberalist institutions seem to be gendered in favour of men.

What one can conclude is that the absence of women from political discourse costs women their right to life, to dignity, to education, to choose a life partner and even to career like it is happening in Afghanistan. The only solution lies in equity and equality for women in politics. Women in leadership roles must be promoted so that they address the issues that are related to women in policymaking both at the international and domestic levels.

We don’t have to go far to fetch examples. Our own former prime minister, late Benazir Bhutto, made commendable efforts for women during her tenure. Being a woman, she understood that the financial dependence of women on men leads to their blatant exploitation. Thus, she established the First Women Bank and also reserved a five percent quota for women in all public sector jobs to cater to financial needs of women during her first term as prime minister.

She also reformed the land reforms sector in Sindh and made it inclusive of women by giving ownership of land to women farmers. She was also the pioneer of the first women’s police station and the Lady Health Worker Programme. She established the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and hostels for working women. It was during her term that computer literacy centres so that women could stay up to date with the emerging technological trends. She also initiated loan schemes for women entrepreneurs.

Another example can be that of Jacinda Arden – the sitting prime minister of New Zealand. At present, she leads the most diverse cabinet which is inclusive of multiple ethnicities and gender identities. She gave birth while in office, which led to changes in nursing rules. She introduced family-friendly initiatives in the parliamentary chambers that are likely to encourage more women to run for political offices in future. Another much-appreciated step has been the roll-out of free sanitary products to students in school and the removal of GST on all sanitary items so that women can easily afford them.

We’re living in the 21st century; scapegoating women for vested political and economical interests must come to an end. Women can well highlight the issues that concern them. Their male counterparts must pay heed to and respect their voices. Women-inclusive policymaking can prove to be beneficial not just for women, but also for the country as a whole. We must realise this soon or else prepare to regress towards the Stone Age.

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