**The way forward**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA 2021-03-26

UNESCO`S constitution in its preamble declares: `Since wars begin in the minds of men it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.` In the feminist context it should read that the defences of women`s rights against patriarchy need to be constructed in the minds of the women who are the most oppressed and exploited. That should be the immediate goal of the feminist movement in Pakistan.

The fact is that the state of women reflects best what author Kazim Saeed titles his book, Dou Pakistan. We have had a female prime minister, a young girl as a Nobel laureate, female pilots, mountaineers, millions of women teachers and highly qualified doctors and so on.

On the other hand, the UN Women`s 2020 report on the Young Women in Pakistan tells us another story. Only 63 per cent of women from 15 to 29 are literate. Nearly 14pc of married women report domestic violence (which is under-reported) while 44pc believe that a man is justified in beating his wife. Over 25pc are married before the age of 18 and only 16pc use contraceptives, resulting in 32pc becoming mothers before the age of 20. As for the labour force participation ratio, it is only 32pc with more than half the workers being unpaid labour in the agricultural sector. It is therefore not surprising that only 24pc are in any way involved in decision-making in the family.

Most of those who work do not even have control over their own cash wages.

This data is significant as it shows that women as a whole cannot claim to be economically empowered. They do not have a share in decision-making either. The situation is actually more dismal. Given our intensely socioeconomically stratified society and the data not being disaggregated by income, the results get distorted. The trends that show improvement are confined to the educated middle classes.

Hence one can say that the demand for azadi raised by the Aurat Marchers on March 8 was not misplaced. But the hopelessness of the situation gives rise to misgivings. It was clear that the women who really need to be liberated were not raising the slogans. Not that they are unaware of the rights the protesters were demanding.

They do not believe this matter is of such urgent concern for them, so deeply have they internalised the state of their oppression.

If they worry it is about where the next meal will come from. Where will they get the funds for giving their daughter jahez to save face. In other words, we will first have to fight a battle against `classism`. Most underprivileged women and also men perceive women`s rights as the problem of theameer or wealthy. In this situation, education could have offered a feasible solution but it didn`t because our ruling classes were reluctant to relinquish some of their powers. That explains the failure of education.

Hence the need to give a new perspective to the women`s situation in the country. The reality is that the women of the privileged classes in Pakistan struggled hard and have done well. If they have not achieved full gender equality it is because nowhere has their Utopian ideal been found and the struggle goes on. We are far from the critical mass that will make the process of change self-sustainable.

The underprivileged women are not however much feminists and educationists insist otherwisebeneficiaries of education that is at best inching forward. Change is not around the corner as is widely believed. So regressive is our education that its impact will be visible several generations later. So massive is the size of the rapidly multiplying population to beaddressed and so entrenched are the barriers of sociocultural and ideological forces that the feeble efforts of the agents of change cannot neutralise the powerful thrust of status quo.

That is why there is the need for a shift in the communication strategy.

We need communi-cators to engage with women on their own territory at street corner meetings and their homes rather than opt for noisy public meetings which polarise the people. This approach has been successfully tried on a limited scale by non-government bodies in the population sector. Activists, especially women, from different organisations have also done well to visit women who have suffered violence to give them support by showing solidarity. Theirs has, however, been a fire-fighting approach. They go into action when a crisis occurs. This engagement should be a continuous and an ongoing process.

That has been the underlying principle of all successful grassroots activism. The activists I have met be it Khushi Kabir (BRAC in Bangladesh) or Dr Roop Rekha Verma (Saajhi Dunya in Lucknow) or Gloria Steinem have uniformly opted for this strategy. m www.zubeidamustafa.com