**Uplifting women**

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Wednesday, Nov 23, 2022

We welcomed the 21st century with great optimism. We entered it on the foundation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to plan a more prosperous way forward.

But enter the first decade of the millennium, and we were faced with global events ranging from natural disasters, terrorist attacks, severe economic and financial crises, and international conflicts. We found ourselves in a time of extreme chaos and uncertainty. And women have been hit the hardest by all of this.

We are in a world of a massive disconnect. Women face multiple crises in society, including households, the corporate world, and, eventually, at a macro level, in parliaments and governments. Their involvement in implementing solutions is imperative to Pakistan’s economic development as they are directly impacted by the policies we devise or the issues we attempt to address.

We must coordinate our efforts towards greater women’s participation, and need to make them more productive at what they are capable of. We need to urge leaders in all spheres to lead in nurturing women’s rights, whether it is decision-making in healthcare, policymaking at the national level, bargaining power within households, educating girls, or developing support for social and economic participation.

Worldwide conflicts, the climate crisis, and the pandemic are glaring reminders of how important it is for women to participate in the socio-economic development of the country. All of these threats have taken a toll on women and girls, especially affecting those who are already far behind. This has not been limited to Pakistan. This pattern seems to be a running theme across the globe. The ensuing Russia-Ukraine war and its devastating impact on food security, energy crisis, inflationary pressures, daily livelihoods, and physical and mental healthcare have been nothing short of uncontrollable.

The UN classifies Afghanistan as between the ‘acute food security’ and ‘humanitarian emergency’ stages of food insecurity, with nearly 23 million people in the country now considered to be food insecure. This has a direct impact on women’s ability to realize their basic rights and contribute to prosperity. In these trying times, it is all the more important to ensure women’s inclusion to produce enormous potential benefits that have not been realized yet.

In 2020, the medical technology company, Hologic, launched a global survey in partnership with Gallup to assess how disproportionately women were impacted as a result of the pandemic. Countries were scored based on women’s responses to questions in five categories: general health, preventative care, mental health, safety and basic needs like food and shelter.

The overall score for the Global Women’s Health Index in 2021 was just 53 out of 100, one point lower than in 2020. No country scored higher than 70 points in 2021, with Taiwan, Latvia, Austria, and Denmark in the top spots.

Moreover, in 2021, Pakistan ranked 178th on the Gender Development Index out of 181 countries. Pakistan is a signatory to Agenda 2030, the UN Convention on CEDAW (1966), and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), and yet it remains ‘Least Gender Equal’, with a large gender gap of 55.6 per cent.

But addressing the gender gap is more complex. One wonders if employing a greater proportion of women is the solution. It is not.

Women constitute half of Pakistan’s population. But how many of them have proved to be productive? Have we invested in their education? Have we given them social security? Have we given them bargaining and decision-making power to choose careers? Do they have rights to property, assets and other resources? Have we created job opportunities for them? Are our workplaces inclusive? Do male members of a woman’s family encourage them to be financially strong?

Have we provided these people with social security? Do they have good maternal health? Do women support each other to uplift their gender? These interlocked and unresolved aspects reinforce the structural barriers that block progress for sustainable development. Instead of hollow protests and slogans, we need households, corporate giants, governments and activists to make women the drivers of change for a sustainable Pakistan. We need to be relentlessly proactive in creating environments that foster women’s participation, empowerment, and belonging in our communities.

We need to bring change; one woman at a time, one man at a time, and one household at a time. And to see a cumulative effect of this will take years. Can Pakistan afford to lag behind? Do we have a choice? Women have the power to be poverty-reducing agents in the economy. Let’s bring them on board.

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