**Wither, Women Empowerment?**

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Females constitute the majority of Pakistan’s population, and for a country aspiring for high development growth and prosperity, it is imperative that this immense resource is leveraged socially, politically, and also in driving the economic growth. For the purpose of this article, I will restrict the discussion to political domain.

Despite some moves across the past few decades, women empowerment on the political front in Pakistan is still a nascent and fragile phenomenon. Although we have reserved seats in parliament for women, the thrust for field politics, and of vibrant contribution from females across the country is still an elusive thought. Our Government is working on supporting females in different spheres of life, but until there is more political representation, the path ahead is a particularly challenging one. Hence, all the more reason in this context, for there to be encouraging and heartening voices, as supported by the media and the civil society as a whole, to provide the vital trigger to promote females in mainstream politics.

I am proud to be one of the handful of female parliamentarians to have become a member of National Assembly through winning the Constituency Election. NA-191 is arguably the most tough political terrain in the nation – given the sheer size and diversity of the Constituency, allied to the traditional entrenchment of strong male-dominated feudal system which hitherto held a tight grip on area politics. However, I took the challenge, and through sheer hard work and inspirational guidance from my mentor Imran Khan, I was able to achieve a resounding victory in the 2018 Elections.

In sharp contrast now lies the morass and baggage in the shape of Maryam Safdar (Nawaz Sharif’s daughter), a convicted criminal released on suspension of her sentence on nullified humanitarian grounds – carrying a political circus show which unfortunately has been propped up by sections of society. Factually, she has no political or social contribution to her name, and rides on the political legacy of her father’s name who himself is a fugitive hiding in London. Convicted by the highest court in Pakistan for fabricating evidence in the Panama case, she has to her credit a rather dubious achievement of the missing sixty million dollars given to her by Mrs. Obama for funding female education. Far from women empowerment, Maryam Safdar is rather a major obstacle in freeing up the political system for the females. It is flabbergasting how brazenly she recently tried to arrogate the title of “Maadar-e-Millat” (Mother of the Nation) – something which for decades has been reserved for Quaid-e-Azam’s sister.

The crass language that has become Maryam Safdar’s hallmark, with continual bouts of blackmailing claims (the woman has been threatening to release objectionable videos of political and other figures if she does not get her way) – aligns her with the exact opposite side of the spectrum to the caliber and class which Pakistan craves for. Her vituperations, especially against the First Lady who is a non-political and private personality, speaks volumes of the damageMaryam is inflicting on the cause of women empowerment in Pakistan. This is consistent with the longstanding strategy of Sharifs to target the females in a most reprehensible manner in politics, dating back to the times Benazir was brought to tears by Nawaz Sharif as he hurled cheap personal remarks on her on the floor of the House. It is rather baffling how Benazir Bhutto’s own son has unfortunately turned rather for the worse, and instead of condemning such cheap attacks on women, is himself involved in making derogatory and crass innuendos about the First Lady.

On the other hand, it is heartening to see how the PTI Government, with a firm commitment and focus on women empowerment has inducted so many female politicians as Parliamentary Secretaries, showcasing the essence of our efforts for the initiative. Prime Minister Imran Khan has lived up to his commitment to women empowerment, even in the realms of composition of the Federal Cabinet. There is an unprecedented representation of females in the Cabinet. Apart from my ministerial portfolio, the Prime Minister has appointed Zubaida Jalal Khan (Federal Minister for Defence Production), Shireen Mazari (Federal Minister for Human Rights), Fehmida Mirza (Federal Minister for Inter-Provincial Coordination), and Sania Nishtar (Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Social Protection & Poverty Alleviation, and now a Senator-elect) to serve the nation in such high capacity. The indicators are clear – that the PTI Government is working on giving females their due share in all spheres of life. However,unfortunately, we are facing a torrent of obstacles aimed at disheartening the females and keeping them away from public positions.

Going back to the dharna (sit-in protest) days of 2014 where PTI in opposition, mounted a countrywide wave of protest against rigging in 2013 Elections, females played a critical role in powering the popularity and the appeal of PTI which later crystallized in winning the General Election of 2018. Even in those days, we were subjected to horrific targeting, not the least led by ex-PM Nawaz Sharif and JUI’s Fazlur Rehman who cast aspersions at the females that were making their mark on the nation’s politics.

It is high time the civil society must boycott the depraved politics of Nawaz Sharif’s daughter which has been inflicting damage on the psyche of our youth. For a convicted criminal to be leveraging the Women Card, bereft of any gainful experience or work in her life, Maryam Safdar is a bane for women empowerment drive in Pakistan. She has masterminded vulgar attacks, much ratcheted up recently on social media by her infamous paid battalion of social media so-called activists. Critically, she has harbored and nurtured, rather rewarded the likes of Talal Chaudhary and Danial Aziz, both of whom have been banned from politics by the Supreme Court for use of foul language. The former was in full glory last year as he launched into a deeply personal cheap attack on one of my fellow female parliamentarians on a prime time television show. This predictably engendered not a strong public rebuke, but rather full support and encouragement from Maryam, whom Talal Chaudhary works directly under. PMLN has a rich history of such shameful politics of targeting females as a tool to intimidate its opponents. Maryam Safdar’s led vicious abusive attacks against other females is an abhorrent exercise which must be condemned by all sections of society.

These two politicians, Maryam Safdar and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, along with many of their supporters are busy pushing back the narrative of women empowerment in Pakistan most diligently. Of recent, there has been a carefully-orchestrated malicious campaign to discredit stellar work done by the PTI social media team. The central theme has been to wave falsely the Women Card and label robust fact-checking convincing tweets outrageously as “harassment”. The ostensible strategy is to ride on the wave of global women rights and conveniently label any challenge, however civil may be the style, made on a claim by any female of that group as “harassment”. Repeatedly, during the pandemic’s first wave, our official social media team deftly dispelled false propaganda being peddled by a section of PMLN and PPP supporters, and those parties’ media wings (both official and unofficial), through politely questioning the validity of given statistics and news. This effective response led not just to desperation and chagrin, but also the polite challenges being outrageously claimed as a form of harassment. Such despicable moves detract from the genuine case many women are fighting and serves merely to degrade the female cause. To date, the risible claim of harassment against our official social media teammembers has not been substantiated at all.

I would strongly urge the civil society to sideline such retrogressive attempts and free up the landscape for the females to come forward in numbers to make their mark in the nation’s political paradigm. We have an abundant number of well-educated and capable females in the country who would make wonderful politicians only if they are given just support by the society and the media. Currently, the dark elements embedded in our political landscape have been a source of deterrence for such females. We all need to work on cleaning up this mess of Maryam Safdar and Bilawal Zardari which is snowballing at the moment. Until this is fought back, robust women empowerment in Pakistan politics would stay as elusivea phenomenon as ever.

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