**[Women in Punjab](https://www.dawn.com/news/1821155/women-in-punjab)**

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I RECENTLY had the opportunity to attend the Women of the World festival held in Lahore. It was exciting to see Punjab-based female leaders from all spheres — such as art, industry, commerce, education, and voluntary work. The event coincided with an important milestone in Pakistan, as Maryam Nawaz was elected the first female chief minister of the province, which is home to a population whose size exceeds that of Egypt, the largest Arab country.

Although Maryam Nawaz’s appointment is not altogether unprecedented in the country’s history — Benazir Bhutto was Pakistan’s prime minister — it sends a positive signal for potential and genuine social change and women’s empowerment. The legacy of Benazir Bhutto inspires optimism for positive change. When women are given the opportunity to thrive, they can make significant contributions to the development of nations. The empowerment of women and girls is crucial for a peaceful and prosperous future.

Thirty years ago, during the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 179 countries reached a consensus that empowering women was the right course of action and the necessary path forward for sustainable global development. Since then, dedicated investments in the health and rights of women and girls have led to significant global improvements.

Numerous women in the province of Punjab continue to face challenges in terms of healthcare, gender-based violence, education and family planning. Addressing these issues demands immediate and sustained support for the rights of women and girls. Fortunately, we have a clear understanding of what works, and that investing in women’s rights has proved to be a significant and worthwhile endeavour.

The new chief minister can make a difference and enhance confidence in women’s leadership in Pakistan.

When we invest in women and girls, everyone gains.

However, while trends show notable progress in the pursuit of gender equality, many women and girls continue to be left behind. This is largely due to the persisting gender inequity, often in combination with other forms of discrimination. Women and girls with disabilities, as well as those belonging to ethnic and racial minorities, are still prevented from realising their sexual and reproductive rights; many are forced into early marriages, which hinders them from fulfilling their potential and getting a chance to turn their dreams into reality.

According to analyses by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and its academic partners, globally, we need $222 billion in new investment to secure an end to preventable maternal deaths, eliminate the unmet need for family planning, and safeguard women and girls everywhere from gender-based violence and harmful practices by 2030. These analyses underscore the critical need for the new Punjab chief minister to consider rational investment in family planning and prevention of gender-based violence. Such strategic allocations are required to achieve transformative results. In this context, the importance of mobilising the private sector as a responsible partner to contribute to social change and the development transformation cannot be overstated.

Girls who are not married off as children have a greater chance of finishing school and securing employment, translating into billions of rupees in economic benefits for Punjab. Increasing women’s participation in the workplace raises their lifetime earning potential and could boost per capita GDP by al­­most 20 per cent, ac­­co­rding to UNFPA global analyses. Businesses that subsidise the sexual and reproductive health of their workforce can increase productivity up to 15pc and reduce talent attrition by 22pc. In brief, when we invest in women and girls, everyone gains.

Only by investing in the societal, economic, and political inclusion of women and girls can we strengthen our social fabric and create something truly beautiful: a future that works for all in the province of Punjab. Taking all of these steps is necessary, but speaking to women and girls directly and engaging men and boys through the efforts of the chief minister and her team are essential for breaking all the barriers faced by women. It is a make or break issue, which calls attention to the fact that the foundation of enjoying rights should be laid within the family.

It is time for political parties to fulfil the promises in their manifestos regarding their population planning agenda. With a dynamic woman leadership in Punjab, the hope is to see positive change concentrated on improving the quality and standards of living — in letter and spirit.

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