[**Women in poverty**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1692898/women-in-poverty)

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AS Pakistan goes through turbulent times on the political and economic fronts, women sink deeper and deeper into poverty. No one seems to care, least of all those leaders who are responsible for the public chaos, the economic uncertainty and insecurity they have created by their casual stance on serious issues.

Tehrik-i-Niswan, whose commitment to the women’s cause has never slackened, has come to the fore in these critical times. Last Friday, it organised a ‘peace table’ on women living in poverty. The Tehrik’s founder, Sheema Kermani, set the stage for a serious discourse with an enchanting musical performance in honour of women. This was a significant move. In fact, Sheema’s role in the women’s movement in Pakistan has been quite remarkable. She launched the Tehrik-i-Niswan in 1979 at a time when women in Pakistan were in dire straits. The Hudood Ordinances, the chaadar and chaardiwari and other such tools of oppression and suppression were being used by Gen Ziaul Haq to crush women.

Creating the Tehrik proved to be a smart move. Its goal was the liberation of women and the medium used was music. Music is universally acknowledged to have a deep impact on the psyche and is a powerful medium for mobilising people for resistance. Sheema has a brave record of dancing for defiance. She has continued to lead this process of systemic change for more than three generations.

Why a peace table? This concept was initiated by some global women claiming that women play the role of peacemakers and have their own inclusive perspective on issues in times of conflict. They must be included in peace negotiations. In that context, Friday’s event was important. It had an array of women speakers who impressed and inspired — Azra Sayeed, Tahira Abdullah, Hoorunnisa Palijo. They reassured us that women activism is as alive today as ever before.

Today, 75pc of those living below the poverty line are women.

The peace table was indeed timely. With so many women now visible in the media and on the political stage, we tend to forget that the really disadvantaged among them are not even visible though they constitute a huge number.

Unemployment, food insecurity, ill health, illiteracy, denial of reproductive health rights and violence have driven women to poverty. Today, 75 per cent of those living below the poverty line are women who are exploited and oppressed. The speakers laid out these facts. With activists like Veeru Kohli around nothing was left unsaid.

What next? Unlike earlier practice, a list of demands was drawn up and circulated. They mainly focused on registering and documenting women’s contribution to the national economy and society. This would require calculating the GDP differently by taking into account women’s unpaid work and disaggregating by sex all statistics related to labour and social welfare. Then there is the demand to revitalise the First Women Bank that was launched by Benazir Bhutto in her first term as prime minister and was providing useful services to women. It mainly financed women-initiated projects.

Some of the demands reiterate the rights of women that have long been ignored, such as ensuring women’s access to assets and ownership of property. The list included the demand for the registration of women-headed households.

The list of demands confirmed a healthy shift in the orientation of the women’s movement in the last seven-plus decades. Starting out by performing acts of charity and philanthropy, the women’s movement developed in the next stage as a drive to educate women and give them awareness about themselves. That was the conscientisation of women to create awareness of their own potential. This was the first step towards the empowerment of women by preparing them to enter the workforce. Thereafter, it has been the phase of consolidation, confirmation and winning public acceptance.

This process should not be underestimated given the fact that as the movement grew, a backlash was created by the misogynist, obscurantist and patriarchal section of society. Since by then enlightened and progressive-minded men had become a part of the feminist movement, feminism began to lose its gender hue.

Some of the demands for the registration and documentation of women’s economic activities come at a vital time. This is the time when the need for documentation of the national economy is being seen as a ‘must do’ measure that will be most timely.

PS: Isn’t it strange that in the current melee in the country today, women have no voice in decision-making? The women who are seen on television are either party spokespersons or party leaders mostly guarding their family’s political legacy. They do not have an independent position of their own. Where is the women’s parliamentary caucus that had been set up in the National Assembly more than a decade ago? It is in times of such polarisation that women’s voices are sadly missing.

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