**Women in social cohesion**

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Wednesday, Sep 22, 2021

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Index 2021 ranks Pakistan at 153 out of 156 countries. Categorised on indicators of social cohesion including education attainment, health and survival, economic participation and opportunity, political participation and empowerment, Pakistan was just ahead of Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan.

While academic literature on the development debate evolves on prioritising gender in the larger security discourse, the changing situation across the Afghan border will re-center attention on causes of conflict and need for social cohesion. The leadership role of women in violent conflicts, post-conflict rehabilitation and peace building is needed now more than ever.

A recent study by UN Women Pakistan observes that multiple factors undermine security and social cohesion and are impacted by women’s voices and representation at the level of state and society. It is essential to draw connections between the local context of gender-normative roles and deep historical processes of power relations between men and women.

The study – ‘Resilience, Community Security and Social Cohesion through Effective Women’s Leadership’ – unpacks various factors that determine the interplay between structure-agency duality aimed at reshaping social realities. While religious, sectarian and ethnic conflicts in Pakistan have led to a collapse of social cohesion, it is key to understand drivers of conflict, and factors that plague security and increase vulnerability for women and girls.

Domestic violence against women, lack of financial autonomy, violation of inheritance rights, exclusion from decision-making processes are all forms of structural violence that promote wider conflict – with more or less similar regional variations. Other forms of gender-based crimes like those “culturally accepted restorative violence (such as karo kari) are predominantly intra-family violence sanctioned by community norms”, notes eminent parliamentarian and activist Dr Nafisa Shah in ‘Honour Unmasked’.

In conflict scenarios, vulnerable youth and women become easy prey for extremist outfits. The UN Women study shows that women’s participation in post-conflict community rehabilitation remains low due to communal restrictions, structural bars and cultural constraints. Although over the years statistically the number of women has increased in legislatures, representation in security forces and executive roles, institutional barriers to women’s participation in effective decision-making and absence of gender focus in security policy remain a sad reality. In other instances, women’s role is limited to firefighting responses to conflict.

For almost two decades, the policy response to countering violent extremism has been reactive in Pakistan. However, the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2018 provides a fresh perspective of acknowledging and addressing traditional as well as non-traditional security challenges, with focus on women-centered labour force and economic empowerment, women’s protection and other areas of social cohesion.

In line with the NISP, it is necessary to readjust the requisite lens to perceive and re-orient Pakistan’s policy landscape. The following aspects must be factored in: participation of women in key decision-making roles to adopt an inclusive approach that is as wide as possible; openness and accountability to make the gender policy development process transparent to those actors directly involved and to the public; effectiveness whereby stakeholders views can still make a difference – with gender as a centerpiece ensure coherence and consistency of the policy development process across all institutions and departments.

Since 2010, Pakistan’s legislative framework has made a breakthrough in terms of gender protection and the rights agenda. However, it is not uncommon to oversee the review and implementation of these key legislations. While legislatures around the world devote a large part of their resources (human and financial) to the process of adopting gender sensitive legislation, it is essential to understand that implementation is a complex and scientific matter that depends on variables such as mobilisation of resources and multiple stakeholders as well as commitment to policies and subordinate legislation, coordination and cooperation with sub-national governments/legislatures and other parties involved.

Other factors can include cultural barriers to women’s participation, little to none resources for gender specific initiatives, deflection of goals, gender power asymmetries, exclusion of minority groups, state capture and clientelism.

In this regard, legislatures must play their mandated roles: ensure requirements of inclusive democratic governance to implement legislation in line with principles of legality; to consolidate a system of appraisal for gender assessing how effective laws and policies are at regulating and responding to problems and challenges to women in post-conflict scenarios; to support improvements in legislative quality by learning from experience – both in terms of what works and what does not in local realities and power topology for this region.

“It is rather hard work; there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or rather scramble over the obstacles. We’ve got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen” – D H Lawrence.

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