Improving parity

BY S A D A F F E A B I D | 1/23/2020

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| THE World Economic Forum`s Global Gender Gap Index 2020 is out, and the results for Pakistan are dismal. Pakistan has consistently been placed amongst the bottom 10 countries and this year it is ranked 151 out of 153 countries. WEF`s Global Gender Gap Index measures differences between men and women in four key areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, thereby providing a yardstick for measuring gender gaps.Why do we find ourselves here, and more importantly, what can we do to improve parity? How can Pakistan accelerate the pace of change, innovate and create momentum towards parity? Pakistan faces a critical issue with only 26 per cent female participation in the workforce, one of the lowest in the region.L ack of women`s economic participation has meant a 30pc loss to GDP, with the majority of Pakistan`s educated women not joining the workforce. Furthermore, according to labour statistics, women are concentrated in low-paid, non-technical fields, mostly in the informal sector with low chances of growth and job security.The challenges that women face range from the lack of safe and affordable transport that makes many women dependent on their male family members, and family mindsets where women`s careers are not seen as a priority, to non-inclusive policies in the workforce, poor facilities and a serious absence of role models in the senior leadership. Public spaces tend to be male-dominated and even today, business conferences abound with `manels`, a panel with only men.Developing and deploying only half its talent has a huge bearing on Pakistan`s growth, competitiveness and future readiness. I have worked on women`s empowerment and advancement involving efforts to promote financial inclusion, increase women`s access to technological skills and enhance women`s leadership capabilities.Here are five ideas to move the needle and disrupt past trends.First, the commitment of the leadership is pivotal to addressing the gender gap. It is a moral imperative to ensure that women have the same opportunities as men. It also makes business sense to increase the number of women in the workforce. Diversity boosts the bottom line and leads to stronger long-term performance. Research shows that diverse teams consistently outperform homogeneous ones as they integrate diverse perspectives, values and reward. The business leadership must see gender equity as a business imperative and drive it with clear goals and metrics rather than view it as justa nice thing to have.Second, policy incentives are important tools to address economic gender gaps.These range from quotas, targets, wage equality legislation, parental leave policy, agile working, and a sufficient care infrastructure to access to finance. Day-care options in government and businesses are also important to encourage women in the workforce and to help them balance their roles as mothers.These should be combined with reporting and disclosure requirements as in the case of the United Kingdom.Furthermore, workplaces must be free of harassment and laws addressing the latter must be implemented strictly.Third, advancing women in leadership roles increases their visibility in positions of power and normalises their presence in high-level positions, thus inspiring future generations. Boards need to play an active role in gender-mainstreaming efforts that ensure developmental plans for `growing` women in leadership positions as well asconducive policies.Progress will be stymied without the representation of onehalf of the population in national and local politics.Fourth, the government must prioritise women`s participation in growing areas such as STEM to take advantages of theopportunities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It must encourage education and training to develop skills women will need in order to participate and succeed in the increasingly technical future of work.Globally, women are under-represented in these emerging roles with only 12pc of women professionals in cloud computing and 15pc and 26pc in engineering, and data and AI.Lastly, it is imperative to recognise that there is no magic bullet or a simple answer.This is a complex, adaptive challenge which requires curiosity, experimentation, a change in attitude and new partnerships involving the public and private sectors dedicated to advancing women`s economic empowerment and overcoming the obstacles.Will Pakistan tap into the potential and leverage talents of half of its population so that it can prosper and build a more equitable society? The time is now and each one of us must play our part. The writer is founder and C EO of C I RC L E Women Association based in Karachi, and a board member of the National Bank of Pakistan.  |  |