

## **Advocating women's rights: The movement in Pakistan**

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There is much hue and cry about women's rights these days. NGOs, human rights groups, government ministries, international donors, the media . . . all are very vocal about the status of women in this country. The government is quick to boast about its commitment to women by pointing out its female representatives. NGOs project their women development programmes, donors have gender equity as one of their key funding criteria, and the media is quick to carry reports on atrocities against women. The list goes on. Yet, when you look around, the effects of all these activities on the lives of the Pakistani women in need of attention is non-existent or very marginal at best.

Why is this the case? The topic is complicated enough to justify numerous research dissertations. But there are some reasons, which are very obvious, even in a very general analysis of women development efforts in this country. Without addressing those facts, it is impossible to think of having a women's movement which will make a substantial difference. The biggest problem is that of looking at all the Pakistani women as one entity and talking about women's development without any qualifications. One of the favourite activities of women's development initiatives, whether governmental or non-governmental, is to pass general statements of oppression and atrocities against women. Media, research reports, presentations at national and international forums often pass sweeping statements about the deprivations faced by women in this society. These are not only false but are unjust to the genius of the Pakistani women, many of whom lead a very full life.

This general bashing of Pakistan on women's issues has very negative effects. It puts off international donors. Pakistan has one of the smallest numbers of NGOs working and one of the reasons for that is often quoted to be the anti-women image of this country. According to newly published report of International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD), the disparity of nutrition between men and women in Pakistan is 87%, which is totally wrong. The fact is that within this society there are many women who are living a healthy and a happy life as young, intelligent and committed students and professional workers. As devoted mothers those are opting to stay home after the birth of their child rather than pursuing careers, as committed social

workers, and as intellectuals representing the country in world forums. To pass sweeping statements about women being deprived is being unjust to all these women who are happy and leading a productive life and want this to be acknowledged.

This is not to belittle the problems of women in the society. This is to highlight the fact that before engaging in any activity, it is important to be clear about the purpose of that activity. It is also important to evaluate the results achieved against the initial targets. In Pakistan there is a lot of advocacy on women's issues. But most of this advocacy has consisted of sweeping statements and generalizations rather than focusing on specific problems of women belonging to various economic, social and religious groups within the society, who all have very different lives and, thus, very different problems.

Advocacy is good and so is the struggle for women's rights. But to be productive, the advocacy as well as the struggle has to be focused. One cannot expect to solve the problems of all the Pakistani women with one formula because there is no such thing as "a Pakistani woman." They are different, and this difference is based on class, region, ethnic background, religious beliefs, etc. Within the Northern Areas for example, the Ismaili and the Sunni women are very different in terms of the freedom of interaction allowed to them because of differences in the interpretation of Islam by the two communities. In a big city, the problems of the daughter of a civil servant, who sends her abroad to study in a foreign university, is very different from the problems faced by the daughter of a clerk belonging to the low middle income group, who is pushed hard because of economic pressures but still won't allow his daughter to work because of social constraints. Or the poor sweepers who go around to ten different houses to make a living for themselves and their children. Similarly, the problems of poor women within the cities are also different from the farmwomen in rural communities.

Admittedly, every society has class differences. But in countries like Pakistan, where wealth is concentrated in the hands of very few, this difference is extenuated all the more, and the religious and social constraints which are less binding in many western states, make this difference all the more pronounced. Moreover, according to a house woman, "women's development programmes have to be defined within the parameters of the social and traditional values. One cannot fight a campaign for women's rights asking for the liberty of northern women. Such a campaign will never be grassroots based because many of the Pakistani women themselves won't believe in it because of their strong religious beliefs and social upbringing." There is admittedly a dire need for women development programmes in Pakistan. Not random campaigns but focused programmes. Specialised programmes, which focus on the problems of women belonging to a specific class, area, etc.

To take one example, Mianwali is one area where it is admitted even by men that due to the societal setup in that area, the women are chronically depressed. There are no social outlets, and confined within the house, women have no productive outlet. How many NGOs or which government women development cells are working on developing specific programmes to provide some outlet for the women in this area? Very small initiatives like theaters for females or a resource centre for women can make a difference. It is easy to pay a lip serve to women's cause but much more difficult to actually plan and deliver something. Having few women ministers from resourceful sections of the society is unlikely to make any difference in the lives of the women who actually need help.

What is critical for women development activities in Pakistan is to develop an appreciation for the variation in the life styles of women of the country and to develop specialised development programmes. This has to be proceeded by field research by competent researchers on specific problems faced by women from various socio-economic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. There is needed for extensive ground research, and not policy research alone, on issues like: women-headed households, issues for women where the men migrate to other cities/countries for jobs, women in the extreme conservative belts where there is chronic depression because of no social outlets, so on and so forth. The general men-bashing and idolising the western notion of liberty for women at this point in time is a waste of resources.

Eventually, however, the entire effort is dependent on building human capital by investing in health, education, and provision of a fair playing field for all citizens of this country. Women, like men, are part of a society and to expect to transform the lives of the women without reforming and investing in the whole society is to dream of the stars. This commitment to human development sadly is not forthcoming so far.

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### Notes to readers

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