



**Issue Brief # IB-01-2017**

**March 8, 2017**

# **International Women's Day and Gender Equality**

**Shahid Najam**

# International Women's Day and Gender Equality

Shahid Najam\*

***“No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you; we are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners.”***

Quaid-e-Azam 1944

International Women's day is celebrated globally on 8 March every year to acknowledge the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of the women. This day is also a reminder to the world for collective and accelerated action to work together for gender parity. The theme for 2017 is: Be Bold For Change".

The Equality of women and men has been enshrined in a number of international declarations, conventions and goals including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030). Successive World Conferences on Women (1975, 1985, 1990, 1995) followed by a special session of UN General Assembly of 2000 reiterated the world community's resolve to ensure full integration of women in the political, economic, social, cultural and decision making spheres and ensure gender sensitive planning and development frameworks. The SDG 5 specifically articulates gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls and constitutes the kernel for achievement of the rest of the 16 SDGs.

The international development agencies including the UN and Bretton Wood Institutions espouse gender as an inextricable part of their development agenda. Women in particular are considered to be a key success factor in realizing the development goals especially through inclusive tools and approaches within the existing social hierarchies.

---

\*The Writer is the Vice Chairman of the ShahidJavedBurki Institute of Public Policy at NetSol(BIPP) and ex Resident Coordinator of the UN in Turkey.

UN estimates that an extra year in School can add up to 25% to a girl's future income while closing the gender gap in employment could augment the GDP to \$12 trillion by 2025. Similarly, public institutions become more representative and innovative by increasing women's proportion besides improving decision making and benefiting the whole societies.

As regards Pakistan, women's active participation and sacrifices in the freedom movement are well documented. In 1947 on the creation of Pakistan, full suffrage was granted to the women. The country has since made assiduous efforts to ensure and safeguard the rights of women and to create conducive environment for them to exercise these rights and expand their development choices. The 1956 Constitution reaffirmed women's right to vote. The 1973 Constitution declares equality as a fundamental right for all. Other important legal frameworks include the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1969, Women Protection Bill 2008 and Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace 2010. The election of Ms. Benazir Bhutto as the first female elected Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988 provided tremendous boost to mainstreaming gender in political life which was further consolidated in 2008 when Ms. Fahmida Mirza became the first women Speaker of the National Assembly in 2008. Earlier the Local Government Ordinance 2001 ordained that 33% seats will be allocated for women in the local government tiers.

Gender equality indeed is an inviolable value for democracy to nurture and mature. In order, however, to fully achieve gender parity, these rights should not only be legally recognized, but, more importantly, be effectively applied to all aspects of life. In the rapidly changing world and the concomitant development challenges, it is absolutely imperative to fully benefit from the talent, potential and huge reservoir of energy and knowledge which women are capable of contributing to sustainable development of human society. However, in the absence of commitment and in the wake of strong cultural taboos, convoluted interpretation of religion and social asymmetry characterized by male chauvinism, women and girls' rights are being eroded and violated leading to the continuation of their disempowerment, discrimination and exploitation.

Pakistan, despite enacting the legal frameworks and avowed expressions of intent by the successive rulers and politicians, has not been able to make major strides or display strong progress regarding enforcement women's rights in the political, social, cultural and economic fields. The efforts to expand and strengthen opportunities for the women by the governments, to give full expression to and realize their potential have not fructified nor the NGOs, academia, private sector and the specialized interest groups have been able to achieve tangible results beyond rhetoric and sentimentality. This is not to belittle the contribution of the individual persons or entities engaged in promoting women cause and emancipating the women from the state of servitude to a state where they can exercise and expand their choices: development, social, political and cultural freely with equal opportunity. However, little, if any progress in concrete terms has been made with regards to the plight of the women especially in the rural landscape of Pakistan.

The growing gender inequality in case of Pakistan is evident from the fact that on Gender Gap Index, the country ranks 141/142; on literacy rate 129/142; on educational attainment 141/142; and on health and life expectancy 128/142. The situation on the extent of economic participation and opportunity is even worse as out of 142 countries surveyed, Pakistan ranks at 141. Out of 342 seats of National Assembly, at present only 60 seats are occupied by women legislators while they have 17 seats in Senate out of 104.

If Pakistan has to accelerate the development momentum and emancipate the people from scourges of hunger, disease and deprivations; pursue growth with equity; and realize the goals articulated in its 2015 vision, the country has to:

- recognize in concrete terms the intrinsic value of mainstreaming gender with social inclusion, women's empowerment and gender equality being at the very core;

- embark on coherent and systematic socio-economic and political transformation by empowering women through enacting and enforcing legal, policy and development frameworks;
- make use of Parliament and the Parliamentary Bodies and Commissions for mainstreaming gender in the legislative, policy and development frameworks both at national and sub-national levels;
- establish Equal Opportunity Commission for Men and Women of Parliament to identify the existing gender inequalities and recommend remedial actions;
- create gender equality units at the divisional and district level to give voice to women and ensure gender sensitive development interventions;
- put in place a new local governance model to galvanize the public institutions, local authorities and civil society organizations to form the triangle of the local decision-making processes i.e., the City/Rural Councils, Women's Councils and Youth Councils - to develop policies and mechanisms to increase the participation and fully harness women's potential in pursuit of sustainable human development based on intra and inter-generational equity.