

Pakistan
Critical Gender Issues in PKISTAN

The distressed world in which we live is characterized by extremely unequal sharing of the burden of adversities between women and men. Gender inequality doesn't only exist in the developing world but it exists in most parts of the world, from Japan to Morocco, from Uzbekistan to the United States of America (USA). The most developed countries like USA and Japan are also entrapped with the gender inequality and violence against women. For example, In the USA, 700,000 women are raped or sexually assaulted each year, with 14.8 percent of women reporting having been raped before the age of 17 (UNIFEM, 2005). Inequality between women and men can take very many different forms. Definitely, gender inequality is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but it is a collection of unrelated and interlinked problems. Let us analyze different areas depicting gender inequality in Pakistan.

Women and Poverty

Though the Pakistan showed a relatively consistent growth performance for the last 50 but this growth failed to reduce the absolute poverty in country. The absolute number of poor has increased from 19 million in 1960 to 42 million in 1995 (UNDP, 1999). A systematic gender analysis of poverty remains vague in Pakistan due to the absence of gender-disaggregated, poverty-related data. The incidence of poverty in rural areas is higher than in urban areas according to both income poverty and broader measures, while the three quarters of Pakistan's poor live in rural areas. The link between gender and poverty is evident all over the world. Out of 1.3 billion people living in poverty, 70 percent are women (ADB, 2000).

Feminization of poverty is a global phenomenon. Women are the poorest among the poor and the most vulnerable among communities. Poverty in Pakistan has a "woman's face." There are considerable intra-household disparities in food distribution and investment of resources between male and female members. Among poorer households, incidence of chronic malnutrition is higher among female children.⁶ Women's access and control over productive resources are extremely limited. In addition to suffering from the same deprivations as men, women face the additional suffering of unequal opportunities to education, health, and other social services due to patriarchal control over their sexuality and cultural restrictions over their mobility (ADB, 2000). The value of the Gender-related Development Index (GDI10) is 0.508 and GDI rank (among 104 countries) is 104 (UNDP, 2005).

Social Status of Women

The social and cultural context of Pakistani society is predominantly patriarchal. Men and women are conceptually divided into two separate worlds. Home is defined as a woman's legitimate ideological and physical space, while a man dominates the world outside the home. In the given social context, Pakistani women lack social value and status because of negation of their roles as producers and providers in all social roles. The preference for sons due to their productive role dictates the allocation of household resources in their favor. Male members of the family are given better education and are equipped with skills to compete for resources in the public arena, while female members are imparted domestic skills to be good mothers and wives (ADB, 2000).

Education and Health for Women

Women's lower social, economic, and cultural standing results in the low health and educational status of women. Social and familial control over women's sexuality, their economic dependence on men, and restrictions on their mobility determine differential access of males and females to health services. Intra-household bias in food distribution leads to nutritional deficiencies among female children. Early marriages of girls, excessive childbearing, lack of control over their own bodies, and a high level of illiteracy adversely affect women's health. Institutionalized gender bias within the health service delivery system in terms of lack of female service providers, and neglect of women's basic and reproductive health needs, intensify women's disadvantaged health status (ADB, 2000). Strong gender disparities exist in educational attainment between rural and urban areas and among the provinces. In 1996–1997 the literacy rate in urban areas was 58.3 percent while in rural areas it was 28.3 percent, and only 12 percent among rural women. There are also considerable inequalities in literacy rates among the four provinces, especially disparities between men and women (ADB, 2000).

Political participation of Women

Although women do not have a role in the formulation of macroeconomic and social policies, they have borne the brunt of such policies. Women's exclusion from decision making bodies at the local, provincial, and national levels does not provide them any opportunity to voice their concerns or promote their perspective on governance. The male-dominated governance structure has been creating and recreating gender inequalities (ADB, 2000). The number of women in parliament remained lower in Pakistan, but the present government raised the women representation in national

and provincial assemblies and local governments. On the basis of the Gender empowerment Measure (GEM11) the rank of Pakistan is 71st (UNDP, 2005).

Violence against Women

Violence against women is the most powerful mechanism used by family, society, and state to silence voices of resistance to the existing gender-related social order. It is a fundamental violation of the human right to life, physical safety, self-respect, and dignity. It is the manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women. The social construction of gender establishes male authority and power over women, and provides the basis for gender-based violence in the society. The different forms of the violence against women in Pakistan include physical and mental torture, murder and honor-killing, sexual harassment and rape, Kidnapping and women trafficking and forced prostitution. It is difficult to assess the extent of violence against women due to lack of data. Also, the incidences of violence are grossly underreported.

Employment and Opportunities for Women

Women lack ownership of productive resources. Despite women's legal rights to own and inherit property from their families, there are very few women who have access and control over these resources. A micro-level survey of 1,000 rural households conducted in 1995 in Punjab found that only 36 women owned land in their own name, while only 9 of them had control over it (MWD, 1999). Similarly, formal financial institutions do not cater to women's credit needs due to the underlying assumption of women's role in the reproductive sphere. The Agriculture Development Bank Pakistan (Now known as Zarai Taraqiyati Bank Ltd), Khushhali Bank and First Women's Bank Limited are the only banks that have small-scale credit programs that cater to women. Other sources of credit to women include informal sources such as non-government organizations, friends, relatives, and moneylenders. In the cultural context of Pakistan, women's wage work is considered a threat to the male ego and identity and women's engagement in multiple home-based economic activities leads to under-remuneration for their work. Pakistani girls and women spend long hours fetching water, doing laundry, preparing food, and carrying out agricultural duties. Not only are these tasks physically hard and demanding, they also rob girls of the opportunity to study (ADB, 2000). |