

On the way to empowerment

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The mainstreaming of women and their active participation in all the spheres of life is a matter of paramount importance in today's globalized world. This importance is not only been acknowledged by all forward looking societies but it is quite evident that they are immensely benefiting from dynamic role of the women in the development and construction of such societies.

While marking International Women's Day (IWD), the women of the world must feel pride that they have achieved several landmark achievements, especially during the last one decade with regard to political, social and economic empowerment and emancipation of the women. Today, hundreds of international organizations round the world as well as many governments and women's group would highlight these phenomenal achievements.

IWD has a special significance for Pakistani Women as well as they are writing new chapters of history with some glorious recent developments in their long struggle for the rights of Pakistani Women. We must not forget the guiding principles of the Father of the Nation, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah regarding status of women in a modern progressive society.

Quaid-e-Azam described his vision by uttering the following golden words; "I have always maintained that no nation can ever be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along with the men. No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men. There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a great competition and rivalry between the two. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the women."

In the persuasion of the above mentioned vision and guiding principles, the first democratically elected prime minister of Pakistan Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto gave women rights and women empowerment supreme importance in his policies. Later, his courageous daughter Shaheed Benazir Bhutto advanced these women-friendly policies with new zeal and vigor. Being an ardent believer of women empowerment, Shaheed BB introduced unprecedented steps and policies to ensure the respect and promotion of women rights in the country.

Besides the commitment with democracy and human rights in Pakistan, the vision of Shaheed BB for women rights and emancipation would always remain a source of inspiration for women right activists. It is an undeniable fact that the provision and protection of women rights is fundamental for the socio-economic empowerment of the women and hence wellbeing of society itself.

Indeed, IWD should be deemed an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment towards raising the status of women in our own society as in spite of various landmark achievements, still there is a long way to attain all the desired result and to eliminate the sufferings of women folks in the

country. This commitment is vital as the status of women is a key indicator of overall socio-economic conditions and progress of societies.

Realizing this reality, the PPP led democratic government has enacted several appropriate laws aiming to protect and safeguard women's rights. We must give credit to all women parliamentarians for these historic developments as they have worked untiringly to turn the dream into a reality. It is true that several challenges are still there that need to be addressed. However, it can be hoped that the negative societal behaviors would also get changed with the passage of time and with rising level of awareness and education.

I deem it quite appropriate to quote my Shaheed leader here regarding her vision of women empowerment. Shaheed BB said that "Empowerment is the right to be economically independent. Empowerment is the right to be educated and make choices. Empowerment is the right to have the opportunity to select a career. Empowerment is the right to own property, to start a business, to flourish in the marketplace. Empowerment is the right to rationally plan and balance profession and family."

It would be also worth mentioning here that the first ever Ministry of Women in Federal cabinet was also introduced by Shaheed BB besides her several other revolutionary measures to empower women. It is a regrettable reality that as a result of political and social indifference towards role of women, still we are unable to get full benefit from real potential of our women and thus wasting this precious human resource which comprises more than 50 percent of entire population of the country.

Recent pro-women legislation would of course be of high significance as it is being expected to be instrumental in alleviating major obstacle in the way of women who were reluctant to join the workforce due to this persistent fear. Moreover, this legislation would be a great help in the efforts for changing the mindset, especially regarding working women in our society.

To empower and uplift the status of women, the democratic government has taken numerous steps including granting complete administrative and financial autonomy to the National Commission on Status of Women and fixation of a 10 per cent quota for women in Government jobs.

Before financial empowerment of women, their social recognition is of prime importance which has been done effectively by BISP. International Women Day is not only to apprise women of their due rights but the governments, civil society, intelligentsia and the world as a whole must take practical steps to ensure that the women folk is not left behind.

Likewise, Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), as a comprehensive social safety net, has emerged as a major contributor in the women empowerment in the country. Declaring women as beneficiaries of the programme, a giant leap has taken by BISP towards the ultimate objective of women empowerment and emancipation in the country.

It is being expected that these measure of BISP would be immensely important to improve the gender balance gap in society. Thus, the programme is contributing in the objective of women empowerment as women have been made sole owner of the business initiated through BISP's

financial support; vocational/skill training is also being provided to women head of a beneficiary family or her nominee.

It is also worth mentioning that more than 12 million women have obtained their Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) during last three years. CNIC is a prerequisite to be a beneficiary of the programme. This is a self evident fact that indicating the significance of the measures of BISP aiming to empower women. It can be rightly expected and hoped that these pro-women measures would achieve the end goal of comprehensive socio-economic empowerment of the women in Pakistan.

Specially written article on the occasion of International Women' Day (IWD)