

WOMEN AND EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

*Chand Bibi Sultana Bukhtiar Zai**

Empowerment is an active, multi dimensional process, which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. Power is not a commodity to be transacted; nor can it can be given away as alms. "Power has to be acquired and once acquired, it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved." Women have to empower themselves. This means that they have to understand the causes of the existing inequality of women in all sectors – economic, social, political, legal and educational- and take the initiative to change their status.⁽¹⁾

The concept that "Woman is as much a human being as man and this entitled to the same freedom, rights and responsibilities" is yet to find universal acceptance in spite of the unequivocal assertion that women have complete and equal rights with men in every respect by the International Bill of Human rights. This has been reiterated right from 1945, in the Charter of the United Nations and then in the convention on elimination of discrimination against women in 1967.⁽²⁾

"No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are 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. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live. You should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life". (Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Aligarh University, 1944)

Poverty undermines women's empowerment. We must continue to focus on women in the developing countries whose hopes for better health, education, dignified livelihood and

* Associate Professor and Director, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

equality are blighted by the curse of poverty. We must feed and clothe hundreds of millions of women, before we can move them to next stage of self-development.

Violence against women is rampant in many parts of the world. We must adopt measures to create viable legislative, administrative and political frameworks to protect them from random or systematic violence.

Women have experienced the violence of both the old and the new. They are victims of oppressive traditions and cultures and victims of the modern nation state and the international economic order. They now seek a third alternative, a deeper, non-hegemonic humanism, which promotes compassion and harmony between woman and man; between peoples of different faiths and different races, between nations of the North and nations of the South and between people and nature.

To reach such a vision we have to change the system, and as women we have the power to do this by changing our immediate environment and system as well as our future generations. Perhaps that is why patriarchal forces are threatened and have found it necessary to subjugate us down the ages.

Fifty six years is a brief period in the life of a country. Pakistan is still struggling to define its identity as a nation. In this brief period Pakistan has military rule for the fourth time. Though an Islamic State, Pakistan has had liberal policies towards shaping a female identity.

Pakistan has its share of female professionals: artists, writers, and educationists, female ministers of education for the Federal Government and for the Province of Sindh, women representatives in the National Council, and a female representative for human rights at the UN. It is heartening to note that some women overcome obstacles that appear to be insurmountable. These women have a strong determination to succeed, they have endurance and perseverance to stick with what

they take on board, self-discipline is very important too. These are qualities that all women can acquire, and many women with varying degrees of disability have the will to succeed. Personal social education should be made a necessary part of the curriculum both in and out of school education.

In Pakistan, women's rights including the right to education are yet to rise to the same level as in the western world. Women are campaigning for equal rights in education and in the work place. If Pakistan has a policy of equal opportunities, then this means safeguarding the rights of the individual, the rights of women.

Psychologists generally agree that issue of defining one's identity is far more complicated for women, and women's dream is more complex because of the traditional family / career divide⁽⁹⁾. Women have to face many barriers in achieving their goals and aspirations. For women with disabilities this task is far more difficult. Family support is therefore essential.

Many women are faced with enduring attitudes of prejudice, not only from the wider community, but often from within their own communities and families. They need a great deal of support and encouragement in crossing these barriers. It is far more difficult to achieve for women who are disadvantaged, do not have an adequate education, and are lacking in family support. For them it is a constant struggle against tradition, prejudice and overt sexism. These women stand to benefit tremendously from support and guidance through government policies and organizations designed to hold them. We have a social responsibility to offer personal choice to all women, including those with disabilities.

Education can open up minds and provide opportunities, what is needed is positive discrimination for women.

Women all over the world bear brunt of armed conflicts. Thousands of women are killed in the course of armed conflicts every year. In many regions, victimization of women is being

pursued as an instrument of war and as a state policy. Thousands of women in Jammu and Kashmir have been subjected to brutal and degrading treatment. The crimes of rape, sexual abuse, molestation and abduction committed against them by the Indian army personnel have been widely reported by international human rights organizations. These crimes must be investigated and prosecuted in accordance with the existing international regimen.⁽³⁾

The Government of Pakistan has made consistent and determined efforts to raise the status of women in Pakistan.

An institutional framework has been created to promote and protect the rights of women all over the country. A full-fledged, separate Ministry, headed by a woman Secretary, is fulfilling its mandate to bring about the empowerment of women in all spheres of life through (a) the mainstreaming the gender perspective in national policies and (b) assistance in the evolution and enactment of appropriate legislation to address specific needs of women. The federal structure is supported by provincial departments to ensure coordination and effective implementation of the decisions.

In the political sphere, efforts are afoot to reserve 33% of seats in the Parliament for women, which would be over and above the seats for which the women can contest elections openly. The Government of Pakistan acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women earlier. A nationwide campaign has been launched to create awareness about domestic and other forms of violence against women and to take remedial measures against this menace. With the help of the NGOs, Women's Protection and Free Legal Aid Centres have been established throughout the country, under a phased programme.⁽⁴⁾

The priorities for the Government in the current financial year include establishment of focal points in government departments and agencies, at the federal and provincial levels, and housing schemes for the needy and destitute women.⁽⁵⁾

The movement for the empowerment of women in politics, in economy, in business, at homes, and in society, is at a nascent stage. It needs vigorous support from governments, international community and all sectors of civil society.

This social-welfare organizations work to provide a forum for interaction and coordination for those engaged in teaching, research or action for women's development. Further goals include developing documentation and publication for women while organizing conferences, seminars, workshops, and short courses on women's studies and feminist issues. This organization works to create health awareness and empowerment amongst our women living in urban slums and in peripheral villages of urban areas. Often, short duration focused group session are held discussing management of menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. Constraints such lacks of health care facilities; unemployment, segregation, illiteracy and male domination are also issues of concern.

1. Empowering women is an important end in itself, not only as a human right but as having the potential to enhance human well-being
2. empowering women and improving their status are essential ingredients of realizing the full potential of economic, political and social development and ensuring sustainable development
3. Changes in the value system are needed. The masses should be educated to perceive that girls and boys are one and the same. Thus can happen only traditional values are replaced by progressive ones.

The quality of women Professionals are more adjusting, sensitive, and compliant and this could be an asset in the new concept of participative management. As women are good at communication, the degree of confrontation is much lower, making them easy to work with.

'Women managers are more patient and more understanding than their male counterparts. Their sincere index to the job,

organization and their profession is far higher,' says Gordon.⁽⁶⁾

A large number of employers also find women managers more balanced and dedicated with an ability to handle work-related stresses and emotions more efficiently says.⁽⁷⁾ However, Deputy Director All India Management Association. She adds women can prioritize tasks faster and are generally more focused to solving problems'

One of the universal disadvantages of women that have been commonly prevailed is their under-representation in the decision-making positions and lack of involvement in decisions in many important spheres. This has been primarily traced to the historically preferential treatment given to boys and men in a broad range of life matters such as decision-making authority.

It is a finding of research that "in all parts of the world, women are facing threats to their lives, health and well-being as a result of being over-burdened with work and of their lack of power and influence"⁽⁸⁾

This areas is usually represented by the participation of women in certain activities such as the holding of managerial and administrative positions and the seats taken in parliament and other elective positions, partly because these positions are friendly to higher levels of decision-making and also because data on other levels of decision-making, such as household and individual levels, are difficult to obtain. Indeed, it is believed that there are more anthropological studies of culture than economic or social studies of individual interaction within the family to establish a power structure and negotiations to achieve equality.

Recently, a five-Asian country study on the status of women revealed considerable variations in measures of power and autonomy, which included decisions in the economic and personal spheres. The more patriarchal, less socio-economically developed societies, such as India and Pakistan, have fewer women making decisions than the Philippines and Thailand and these are tied

closely to their societies and culture rather than to individual characteristics. For example, 86.5 per cent of Filipino women reported having a major say in deciding on major purchases in the household, compared with 16.5 per cent in Pakistan. Purchase of jewellery follows the same pattern, with 55 percent of Thai women claiming to be able to make such decisions by themselves, compared with the low level of 16 per cent of women in India and Pakistan.⁽¹⁰⁾

In short, the pervading notion that men are the de facto decision makers in the family is corroborated by the research and be ethnographic accounts of women.

More and more women suffer increasing financial and economic hardships. This is especially important in this region, because two thirds of the poor in Asia are women. This is caused by a number of occurrences, some perpetuated by age-old practices and beliefs and others that might have arisen out of newly emerging conditions.

Social norms are hard and slow to change. The vicious cycle of non-investment in women and their inability to participate in the work market on equal terms with men will have to be broken, not by focusing on changing norms but by influencing these norms through public policy. Policies that consciously allocate more resources (and reduce inequities) in favour of programmes in education and training for women will have to be made and implemented. There is a need for more conscious efforts to foster non-traditional and progressive roles for both men and women. It is to be hoped that this can help in weakening patriarchal values and systems in the region.

There have been considerable improvements in the conditions and position of women in the past few years. Significant studies have been made in education, where literacy rates for women are rising, with the important observation that there is still a gender gap but that this has been narrowing over the years.⁽¹¹⁾

Before, I involve the minds into what women's role, rights and responsibilities are, I would first like to make a point. That recently in Western Universities sessions, I have heard a discussion by ego-dominated males that if we accept that women's rights are human rights, then they may include in as human resource, and they actually mean to say that women must equally give inputs to the corporate world despite the fact that she may give birth to babies, do the domestic chores unequally and bear physical burdens, must provide equally efficient input to the job at the same time. But they forgot during the session that if all human beings (both men and women) are human resource, after all these human resources are human beings, however. So take as much work from the human resource till she remains a human being.

Before I embark on the recommendations, first and foremost suggestion is that to achieve a higher level of socio-economic freedom and political empowerment for women, we need to change men's mind and mentality, his attitude and altitude and his biasness and behaviour towards women. A few workable for women are:

- The need for educational programmes.
- Door-to-door Awareness sessions for both men and women.
- Women easy accessibility to information on specialized career, teachings and trainings (centres run by women for women).
- Equal participation and opportunities for women in education and empowerment.
- Equal food and fabric programme in rural areas.

REFERENCES

1. Pillai, Jaya Kotha . (1995): *Women and Empowerment*, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing Home.
2. "Advancement of Women", Pakistan Mission to the United Nations, New York.
3. *National Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000 A.D.* (1988): Government of India, Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development.
4. Naureen Amjad (1995): *Unveiling the Issues*, Lahore, Nabiza Publishers, 9-B, Rattigan Road.
5. Bakshi, S.R. (1987): *Gandhi and Status of Women*, Bombay Criterion Publications.

6. Gordon, F. E. and Strober, M. H. (eds.), (1975): *Bringing Women into Management*, New York: Mc Graw-Hill Book Co.
 7. Horner, M. S. (1972): *Towards an Understanding of Achievement Related Conflict in Women*, Journal of Social Issues.
 8. Wallace, P. (1982): *Women in the Work Place* – Talk Given at Radcliffe College, Oxford, April 23.
 9. Unwallied J. M., (1977): *Beyond the House Hold Walls – A Study of Women Executives at Work and at Home* – Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay.
 10. World Bank, *Toward Gender Equality: The Role of Public Policy* (Washington, DC 1995).
 11. ESCAP, *Women in Asia and the Pacific, 1985-1993* (ST/ESCAP/1447).
-