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## CRITICAL ISSUES FOR WOMEN IN PAKISTAN

Keeping these concerns in view, women activists in Pakistan have adopted a two-pronged strategy. On one level they are trying to build up pressures for the affirmative action and reservation of women's seats in all legislative and local administrative bodies. Women have been demanding reservation of 33 percent of seats at national, provincial, and local government levels, which should be filled through direct election by joint electorate. There is also a demand that the Political Party Act be amended to make it mandatory for all political parties to field at least 33 percent of female candidates during election. On the other hand, women are also trying to create an alternative vision of politics based on social justice.

Pakistani women are trapped in a web of dependency and subordination due to their low social, economic, and political status in society. The majority of women suffer from all forms of poverty. In order to change women's position and societal view of their inferiority, structural changes need to be brought about in the social and economic order that shape our social world.

Women are totally absent from the state structures and decision-making bodies that could introduce such structural changes. Women's inclusion in governance structures is critical to bring about substantive changes in the development policies and programs that would lead to a shift in gender relations in the society.

Presently, in order to maintain the status quo, institutionalized violence against women at the family, community, and state levels is used as a mechanism to ensure their compliance with gender norms. This serves to prevent any attempt leading to the subversion of the male order.

Ironically, at the same time, a great deal of rhetorical attention has been paid to gender issues at the national level. Pakistan has made several commitments at national and international forums to ensure gender equality at home. However, there is a wide gap between commitment and implementation. The persuasion of the State to translate its commitment to gender equality into concrete reality is the major challenge faced by women in Pakistan.

These are the four critical areas in ADB's gender strategy for Pakistan.

### **Feminization of Poverty**

Pakistan's consistent economic growth rate for the last 50 years has failed to bring prosperity to its people. The absolute number of poor has increased from 19 million in 1960 to 42 million in 1995.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of reliable data on poverty assessment, as the definition of poverty and tools for the assessment of poverty has been constantly changing, it becomes difficult to assess trends in poverty in Pakistan. A recent study conducted on the profile of poverty in Pakistan gives different percentages of people living in poverty according to different definitions, i.e., calorie intake, 21 percent; basic needs, 29 percent; income poverty, 30 percent; Poverty of Opportunity Index, 44 percent; and Human Poverty Index, 47 percent.<sup>2</sup> A systematic gender analysis of poverty remains elusive in Pakistan due to the absence of gender-disaggregated, poverty-related data.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nation Development Programme (1999), *A Profile of Poverty in Pakistan*, Islamabad, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> The Department for International Development (DFID) has commissioned a study to design the Participatory Poverty Assessment. The study will provide a better understanding of the complexity of poverty.

Poverty manifests itself along the lines of class, gender, region, and rural-urban divides. The incidence of poverty in rural areas is higher than in urban areas according to both income poverty and broader measures.<sup>3</sup> Three quarters of Pakistan's poor live in rural areas. A review undertaken by the Social Policy and Development Centre claims that "while incidence of poverty has been falling in the urban areas in recent years, it has been climbing in rural areas."<sup>4</sup> Among the four provinces, Balochistan is the poorest. The highest incidence of poverty is found in the rural areas of Southern Punjab and Balochistan.<sup>5</sup>

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. Feminization of poverty is a global phenomenon. Women are the poorest among the poor and the most vulnerable among communities.

Social relations of gender mediate women's experience of poverty. Poverty in Pakistan has a "woman's face." There are considerable intrahousehold 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

Pakistan ranks 120 in 146 countries in terms of the Gender-related Development Index and ranks 92 in the Gender Empowerment Measurement ranking of 94 countries. Gender gap in all key social sectors is increasing in Pakistan. Box 6 shows glaring gender disparities that exist in some human development indicators.

The impact of macro-economic stabilization, liberalization policies, and structural adjustment programs have been disproportionately high on women. In the absence of macrolevel data, it is difficult to assess the impact of a structural adjustment program on people in general and on women in particular. However, some microlevel studies have clearly indicated the effects on unemployment, inflation, decline in real wages, and reduction in caloric intake for the poor.<sup>7</sup>

Economic crisis and structural adjustment affected women adversely in their roles as producers, household managers, and mothers. Although women's labor force participation rate increased during 1988–1993, there was also a sharp increase in their unemployment from about

**Box 6: Gender Disparities in Human Development Indicators**  
(percent)

	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Literacy rate	28.0	51.0
Gross primary enrollment	64.0	80.0
Combined enrollment ratio	25.0	50.0
Labor force participation	11.4	69.1
Earned income share	20.0	80.0
Seats in Parliament	3.4	
Top administrative/management jobs	3.0	
Maternal mortality	340 per 100,000 live births	
Mortality rate (1-4 years)	Female 12% higher than males	

Source: United Nations Development Programme (1998), "Statement on Gender in Pakistan."

<sup>3</sup> UNDP (1999), *A Profile of Poverty in Pakistan*, Islamabad, p.46.

<sup>4</sup> Social Policy and Development Centre (1998), *Social Development in Pakistan: Annual Review*, p.34.

<sup>5</sup> See footnote 4, Executive Summary.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 6, Executive Summary.

1 percent to 10 percent, accompanied by a 40 percent decline in self-employment.<sup>8</sup> As household managers, they had difficulty in managing their households due to high inflation caused by the decline in food subsidies especially wheat and edible oil, which constitute a large proportion of the caloric and protein intake of the poor. Due to budget cuts in the public social sector expenditure, women have to increasingly take on more responsibilities for the future survival of their children.<sup>9</sup>

Due to male migration and high unemployment, more and more women are seeking income-earning opportunities in the job market. Lack of education and skills forces many to concentrate either in the informal sector or secondary sector of the segmented labor market. In 1990–1991, 77 percent of economically active women in urban areas were working in the informal sector where they were economically exploited and had no protection of labor laws.<sup>10</sup> Exploitative working conditions at the workplace, compounded by oppressive conditions at home where women continue to take the sole responsibility for domestic work, overburdened them to the detriment of their health.

The number of female-headed households is growing in Pakistan. The *Socio-Economic Survey of Pakistan* reports that less than 5 percent of women head households. This is contrary to the findings of the study conducted in Karachi in 1987 that indicated women head 10 percent of households. Female-headed households are usually among the most impoverished due to the low earning capacity of women. The average monthly income of female-headed households is only one fourth of male-headed households.<sup>11</sup>

The Government is fully aware that if structural adjustment reforms continue to be launched without cushioning their impact on the poor, a large number of households may fall into the poverty trap, which could cause a serious civil unrest in the society. Some positive initiatives have been launched to protect the poor, including the SAP launched in 1992 to improve the quality of and access to basic social services with special focus on women. Other initiatives include the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund to address income poverty, Public Works Program, Small Farmer Based Agriculture, Employment/Credit Facilities, Training and Credit for Women, Land for Landless, and Food Stamps Program, along with traditional Islamic safety nets for the poor, like Zakat and Bait-ul-Mal. There is a pressing need to sharpen the focus and efficiency of these poverty reduction efforts to reach women who are the poorest of the poor.

### **Political Participation**

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. It is critical that women claim their share of power to make decisions that affect their lives. The synergy of women's strong political representation and reduction in the incidence of female poverty has been increasingly recognized all over the world.

Women's representation in formal political bodies is negligible in Pakistan. There are only 3 percent of women in the National Assembly (7 out of 217), about 2.3 percent in the Senate (2 out of

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.161.

<sup>9</sup> Shahruxh Rafi Khan and Mehnaz Ahmed (1996), "Gender and Structural Adjustment in Pakistan." *The Lahore Journal of Economics*, vol.1, no.1, pp. 78-82.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 4, Executive Summary.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.13.

87), and 0.4 percent overall in the four provincial assemblies (2 out of a total of 483). In local bodies, about 12.5 percent of seats are reserved for women in Punjab, while Balochistan has reserved 27.6 percent of its seats for women. Elections for local bodies in two other provinces have yet to be held. There is no woman minister at the federal level, and only one has the status of a minister of state (1 out of a total of 21).

Women's participation in politics as voters, candidates, and political activists is increasing; however, this has not led to the emergence of women as leaders in the arena of formal politics. This is so because political party structures are male-dominated. Women in political parties are not given decision-making positions within the parties and are often not fielded as candidates during elections on the pretext that they lack political skills. The traditional notion of women's role is primarily in the family context. The nature of political parties, the criminalization of politics and the culture of corruption that permeates public life, and the fear of character assassination effectively block women's participation in government structures.

The failure of government structures to redress gender disparities in access to productive resources and adequate provision of social services for women have led to rethinking among women activists that they must become part of the state structure to influence policies and politics in their own favor. The lack of political commitment to implement gender-related components of policies necessitates women's participation in the government structure to ensure their implementation.

After having established a link between lack of representation of women in the political systems and the disproportionate poverty of women, women's rights groups, NGOs, and activists started pushing the margin of the state and political parties to create political space for them through affirmative action. This is reflected in their demand to reserve 33 percent of the seats for women at the local, provincial, and federal government levels, to be filled through direct election by the joint electorate. They also demanded a change in the Political Parties Act and People's Representation Act in favor of women.

It is imperative for women to gain political representation in democratic institutions for any substantive change to occur in their lives. Also, their visibility in formal political bodies will challenge the ideology of the sexual division of labor. Their increasing visibility in the public arena will enhance their status and change social attitudes towards them. Therefore, women's political representation has become a priority advocacy issue of women's movement in the country.

### **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 ensures that women will continue to accept gender hierarchies in all social relations of production and reproduction and perpetuates their subordination.

Violence against women 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.

Some forms of violence against women, especially domestic and customary violence, are so entrenched in the culture that they are hardly recognized as violence and largely condoned by the society. It is difficult to assess the extent of violence against women due to lack of data. Also, the

incidences of violence are grossly underreported. However, a few microlevel studies give some indication on the form and extent of violence inflicted on women.

Domestic violence is fairly widespread across all classes. It ranges from slapping, hitting, and kicking, to murder. Since the society, police and law enforcing agencies view domestic violence as a private matter, it goes unnoticed until it takes extreme forms of murder or attempted murder. A study conducted by the Women's Division suggests that domestic violence takes place in approximately 80 percent of the households in the country.<sup>12</sup> Incidences of stove burning are being increasingly reported in the press. During 1998, 282 burn cases of women were reported in Punjab. Of these, 65 percent died of their injuries. Data collected from two hospitals in Rawalpindi and Islamabad over a period of three years since 1994 reveal 739 cases of burn victims.<sup>13</sup>

The official figure for murder of women during 1998 was 1,974; majority of them were victims of their own relatives—husbands, brothers, fathers, and in-laws.<sup>14</sup>

Rape is one of the most common crimes against women but grossly underreported due to the shame attached to the victim. According to official statistics, one woman is raped every six hours in the country. During 1998, 706 rape cases were reported in Punjab, of which 55 percent of the victims were minors and half were victims of gang rape.<sup>15</sup> Women are also victims of male honor. If the male honor is compromised in any way, the womenfolk of the rival party are humiliated by being made to strip off in public and paraded through the streets to take revenge from the family. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recorded 48 such cases in 1992–1994.

Marital rape is not even recognized as a criminal offense in Pakistani law, which is a negation of women's right over their own sexuality. Rape in police custody is also widespread but vastly underreported as it involves members of the police as the perpetrators of this crime. Out of 41 cases reported in Punjab during 1998 only six got registered and only one person was arrested. A 1992 report found that 70 percent of women in police stations are subjected to sexual and physical violence.<sup>16</sup>

The provision of the Hudood Ordinance that requires four adult male Muslims of good repute as witnesses of the actual rape or the rapist to confess as a condition of proving rape has made it impossible for rape victims to get justice. Under this law, if a rape victim cannot prove rape she can be charged with and sentenced for adultery.

Trafficking of women is also on the rise. Foreign women from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar are brought to Pakistan and sold. In 1991–1993, approximately 100–150 women from Bangladesh were brought into Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Kidnapping, forced prostitution, and sexual violence at the workplace are other forms of violence on the rise. Customary practices that include exchange of women between families, selling and buying women as a commodity, using women as barter to settle family disputes, marriage to Quran, and killing them in the name of honor are other forms of violence against women being condoned in the name of tradition and culture.

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<sup>12</sup> See footnote 8, Executive Summary.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 9, Executive Summary.

<sup>14</sup> Shahla Zia and Farzana Bari (1999), "Women's Political Participation in Pakistan, Islamabad," p.25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>16</sup> "Report of the Commission of Inquiry for Women" (1997), Pakistan, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF (1998), "Children and Women in Pakistan: A Situation Analysis," Islamabad, p.57.

There is no support mechanism for victims of male violence. There are only 13 state-run *dar-ul-amans* (shelters) for women in the country. The living conditions of these shelters reinforce women's subordination and oppression by establishing control over their sexuality and mobility instead of providing them with a supportive environment where they could rebuild their own lives. They do not have the means to protect themselves against violence. The legal system does not encourage women victims to use it for the redress of the violation of their rights. High costs and delays in obtaining justice further discourage women victims/survivors to avail of legal means to protect their rights.

The increasing violence against women is a matter of serious concern. A society where violence against women is endemic can never fully develop either socially or economically. Violence in the private domain undermines women's confidence and self-esteem and destroys their health, while the fear of sexual assault in the public domain deprives them of their full participation in all aspects of development. This is a high social and economic cost for the society to pay. Violence against women is also a public health and development issue. As stated in ADB's gender and development policy paper, the relationship between female-focused violence and maternal mortality, health care utilization, child survival, AIDS prevention, and cost to the judiciary and law enforcement agencies is receiving increasing attention."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, a society free of violence is an essential condition to establish women as equal partners in development.

### **Translation of Gender Commitments into Practice**

Pakistan is one of those countries that has appropriated the gender discourse and has reflected it adequately in its national level policies and programs. It is a signatory to numerous international conventions, including the Convention on The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Health for All by the Year 2000, Education for All by the Year 2000, and Universal Access to Reproductive Health Information and Services by the year 2015. At the national level Pakistan has officially launched the National Plan of Action (NPA) to Implement the Beijing Platform of Action. It has reflected gender concerns in the Ninth Plan, National Strategy on Poverty Reduction, and Agenda 2010. However, the gap between commitment and reality is too wide. Policy commitments have hardly been delivered in practice. No substantial efforts in terms of financial allocation, implementation plans, or machinery appear to be in place to translate the vision reflected in policy documents into operational reality in the country.

The translation of *de jure* rights of women into *de facto* rights will substantially improve the position of women. This is not to say that the policy environment in Pakistan is ideal for women. Antiwomen legislation such as the Hudood Ordinance and the laws of evidence, *Qisas* and *Diyat*, are still a part of the Constitution. Other legislation such as family and labor laws also discriminate against women.

Women in Pakistan are now confronted with the challenge of how to ensure that the State will fulfill its commitment towards gender equality. International conventions require Pakistan to create a favorable social, legal, and political policy environment for women by introducing necessary changes. However, no substantive initiative has been taken by the Government to meet its international commitments. Therefore, it is important that the international community and social movements at the national level assume a stronger role in this regard. Similarly, civil rights movements need to build up support from the grassroots level. In order to expand the base of social movement for gender equality, civil society needs to be strengthened to be able to fulfill its role.

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<sup>18</sup> Asian Development Bank (1998), "The Bank's Policy on Gender and Development," p.7.