
Social Policy and Women Status in Pakistan: A Situation Analysis

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Abstract

Women status is a scorching issue in the underdeveloped countries, like Pakistan, since last six decades. This article is a descriptive review of women status and social policies in Pakistan. In this article, the situation of women in Pakistan with regard to their poor health conditions, educational status, economic conditions, and violence against them will be discussed. The role and the situation for women in a customary society of Pakistan include a great suffering. They suffer not only due to cultural constraints prevailing in the country, but also due to the government's unwillingness to improve women's status. Even being a signatory of different international commitments and having national policies to ensure gender equality, the domestic policies are still unable to protect women from violence in Pakistan. There is a discernible gap between the policy making in the country and their implementation mechanism, resulting in the poor status of women in the country.

Key Words: Women Status, Illiteracy, Poor Health, Violence, Poverty, Socio-Economic Issues

Introduction

The status of women in the world is an extensive issue across the world. Their status covers issues such as female illiteracy, maternal health, economic empowerment, extreme violence, and their poor status in the family affairs. The low status of women obstructs them from having power over their own lives across the world. This situation creates an environment which is based on gender inequality and social stratification. It is a general idea that women are innately

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inferior to men (Fine, 1992). Men are considered as superior in different familial and societal works. This phenomenon is commonly found in the third world countries and especially in the South Asian countries. South Asia is a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic region of the world. But one thing is found communal among all the cultures and areas of South Asia that is gender discrimination. Much has been published regarding women's status in Pakistan but still women all across the country are suffering in different domains.

Pakistan is one of the countries of South Asia, having a high ratio of gender inequality. It is ranked 115th among 187 countries on the HDI in the gender equality(*The News*, 30th November, 2011).According to United Nations Statistical Annex, Pakistan is a country where life expectancy for female is 67 years, while it is 66 for males (from 2005-10); under five mortality for girls is 94 while it is 85 for boys (from 2005-10); pregnant women who receive prenatal checkup are 61percent (from 2000-08), deliveries attended by skilled attendants is 39 percent (from 2000-07), maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births is 320 (2005), adult literacy rate is 40 percent for female while it is 67 percent for males (from 2005-08). Adult (15+) labor force participation rate is 11 percent for females and 86 percent for males. These demographic indicators show that women face a prominent gender disparity in different areas of life.

The customary thought of people in Pakistan revolves around the notion that, “*Girls are a burden and boys generate income.*” This behavior reflects certain discriminatory thoughts regarding gender issues. The birth of a baby boy is always celebrated even in the lower class families, while the birth of a baby girl is never welcomed. Starting from this behavior a woman is always an inferior being in Pakistani society. At the occasion of the birth of a male baby

special ceremony are observed announcing “Ye stones and plants, listen that a son has born to a..... certain person”; firing guns; rejoicing and congratulating each other. Even among Zahris (Brahvi), a father whose first child happens to be a girl receives a sound shoe beating from his near elder male relatives unless he offers them a sheep or a goat as a bribe (Malik, 2005).

The status of women in Pakistan can be determined by the following words of experts Mumtaz & Shaheed (1987) as,

“The Pakistani womanhood whether belongs to rural or urban areas are poor and virtually illiterate, leads a life of physical hardship involving long hours of tedious chores for which there is neither compensation nor recognition. These women bear the burden of child bearing and house work. Consequently, they are the first to rise and last to sleep. They are to light fire, offer their prayers, milk the cow and buffalo, prepare the breakfast, have the dishes washed and house cleaned. This is not the end of her duties. She has a long day ahead. She is to look after the livestock, rear the children, look after the aged and sick, collect fire wood, if she is in hilly area and has to fetch water. After every one has collapsed in the bed, she is still to prepare for the following day and is the last to sleep. Despite these functions, she is still the inferior being.”

From the above words, the routine life of a Pakistani woman can be judged that she is the only individual who works for the whole family and no male member helps him. This kind of gender inequality is wide-spread in Pakistan and results in deep rooted inequalities found in household, and community. From her childhood till puberty, she has always been discriminated in the familial domain. A son is always preferred than a daughter. She is given low quality food, less education, delayed health care, no property rights, less

valued work by the family and community. When she is a baby, her brother is always dressed before her; he is given meat, milk and fruit, allowed to enroll in the school even in poor families, while she is kept at home. She is not encouraged to get an education as spending on her is considered as *watering a neighboring tree* (Malik, 2005). The only thought of her is that she should marry soon and her rest of the expenses should tolerate by her husband. Her only duty is to perform household tasks which are not accounted by the government. This kind of status assigns her a miserable standing in the society.

Society has already predetermined roles for them. Intolerance for a girl child starts from her birth and continues throughout her life. In her adult age, she has to face different kinds of disparities i.e. from emotional to physical. In patriarchal societies, like Pakistan, family is the only institution which sets out the norms and ethics for the two sexes of the society. Under this prevailing system, father, brothers, and husbands are considered as the custodian of women and decision making powers are in their hands only.

While talking about the property rights, it is often transferred to the male members of the society. Islam and the constitution of Pakistan command that women should be given her right in the inheritance left by parents and her husband. The law of the land prescribes that a woman must be given her right in inheritance. Surprisingly, the customary practices proscribe it. Women are not allowed to control their share of the property (Asad, 2007).

Son preference over daughters is commonly seen in the families. Men are the pivotal in lineage. As she grows young, there is no place for her at her father's home. She lives there, only till her marriage. It is very uncommon, that women live with their parents after marriage. After marriage, her productive

activities are transferred to her husband's home. The marriage of a woman is much costly than a son, for the parents. As the parents have to pay a heavy amount of dowry for their daughters, and hence her birth is a sign of family burden. So the birth of a girl is taken, as a least wanted phenomena.

The basic rights of women are usually violated in homes and within communities; even they are not given their due rights to take decisions in their life matters. Marriage against the will of daughters is common in the society. In Pakistan, usually daughters have to go to court as their fathers bring them there, upon their love marriage; the court may invalidate their marriage and even charge them with the crime of having sex outside of marriage (Burn, 2000). Divorce is a taboo for women only and not for men. Society has inflicted the stereotypical roles and beliefs with the women's status that that it has become impracticable for them to break out of the vicious circle, in which they are residing. In some communities limitations on women are much more rigorous which allows greater mistreatment and disparities. Due to the above mentioned facts, she faces illiteracy, poor health conditions, violence and poverty in the country.

Health Conditions of Women

Health problems in Pakistan are in an enormous phase, and women's health problems are even worse than that. They undergo from, not only, absence of health care, not only due to a complete lack of health facilities, but also as a result of the absolute inaccessibility of these services. Women face conventional taboos against consulting doctor, which is based on fake traditions. On the actual grounds, health facilities are not available in all the corners of the country.

Secondly, women have to rely on the decisions to go for distance treatment. According to a World Bank report,

“Pakistan lags far behind most developing countries in women’s health and gender equity. The sex ratio is one of the most unfavorable to women in the world, a result of excess female mortality during childhood, and child bearing. One woman in every 38 dies in childbirth and half of infant deaths result from poor maternal health and nutrition” (Tinker, 1998).

Women undoubtedly, face poor health hazards. They face poverty, lack of access to better health conditions, maternal mortality, maternal morbidity, and discrimination in getting health care, puberty and menopausal problems, dietary deficiencies, no spacing between children, delays in child-delivery, home deliveries by unskilled birth attendants, and violence in different strata of society. The women health’s true picture is depicted by SOGP (2009), as

“We are losing three women per hour because of pregnancy associated complications. More than 30, 000 young women die every year in Pakistan, which gives a mortality rate of 340/ 100,000 pregnancies. More than 80 % women deliver at home in the presence of unskilled birth attendants. In majority of secondary and tertiary health care centers, emergency obstetrical care is not available on a 24 hour basis.”

A regular increase in the number of poor women’s health indicators shows high maternal mortality and morbidity. Along with this there is absence of trained medical staff and facilities. Rural women live in poor life standards. 43 percent child deliveries in urban areas take place at home while in rural areas, 74 percent deliveries take place at home. Only 39 percent of deliveries take place in the presence of skilled medical practitioners (PDHS, 2006-07).

Women's health is a continuing danger to their life which is not compensated by the government policies.

In the last decade, the government has given attention towards preventive and curative health care policy in white and black, but less attention on primary health care implementation. Meager state resources, instable governments, and lack of will of the government towards women's health status have increased the women miseries in the country.

Situation of Female Education in Pakistan

According to the Government of Pakistan the overall literacy rate of the country was 58%, out of 58% the male literacy rate was recorded up to 69% while female ratio was at a disadvantaged level of 46%. Even worse was the Urban-rural picture where in the rural areas the female literacy rate was 35% only (GOP, 2010-11). The following table shows a detailed picture of rural-urban and gender disparities in education sector in the country.

Girls fall behind in the education sector and gender discrimination is a prominent factor in this regard. There is a huge female population who has never gone to school. As gender discrimination can be observed in all the fields in the country including the education sector. Pakistan is having such statistics in female literacy due to such discrimination. This discrimination is seen at the primary level in the country as there are higher number of boys' schools than for girls' schools, and male teachers are higher in number than female teachers (UNESCO, 2010). Higher school attendance among boys is observed than the girls as primary net enrolment rate for girls is 51 which show that rest of half female population never attended school in Pakistan. In Baluchistan, the school

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attendance rate is even lower at the primary level as only 32 percent girls attend primary school (GOP, 2008).

Table no. 1. Literacy Rates (10 years and above) – Pakistan and Provinces

Province/Area	2008-09			2009-10		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Pakistan	57.4	69.3	44.7	57.7	69.5	45.2
Rural	48.6	63.2	33.4	49.2	63.6	34.2
Urban	73.3	80.3	65.6	73.2	80.2	65.5
Punjab	58.7	68.5	48.8	59.6	69.1	49.8
Rural	51.3	63.1	39.5	52.5	64.0	40.7
Urban	73.3	78.9	67.4	73.5	78.9	67.8
Sindh	59.4	71.2	45.6	58.2	70.2	44.3
Rural	41.8	59.0	20.7	41.0	58.2	20.3
Urban	75.7	82.9	67.5	74.9	82.2	66.8
KPK	50.0	69.6	31.1	50.9	70.1	32.3
Rural	47.1	67.9	27.4	48.4	68.3	29.1
Urban	63.4	77.4	49.0	62.7	77.8	47.4
Baluchistan	51.5	68.5	30.2	51.5	69.2	29.3
Rural	46.5	64.4	23.8	45.7	64.2	22.5
Urban	66.4	81.0	48.8	69.6	85.0	50.6

Source: Labor Force Survey 2009-10, Federal Bureau of Statistics.

The existing culture of Pakistan, in which untimely marriages, sex segregation, shortage of employment opportunities for women, and long distances to schools have caused a low education level of women. Furthermore, there are numerous other aspects such as; girls' help to their mothers in the domestic chores, unwillingness of parents to send their girls to co-educational institutions, son preference, and illiteracy of parents, and Government's unwillingness to increase the female literacy rate at actual grounds, are also responsible for low female education in Pakistan. Educating boys are thought to be as a good savings, while educating a girl is considered as a financial loss. The ideas behind

this situation lay in the fact that the boys will live with the parents forever and girls will be married soon.

Women Economic Contribution

Women in Pakistan, participate in different areas to be included in the economic activities of the country. However, some experts are of the view that job opportunities for women are narrowed to agriculture, house chores, and small scale industries (Siddique, 2006) in Pakistan. Women now vigorously participate in different kind of activities like agriculture work, production, electricity and gas, construction, trade, transport, hotels, financial intervention, real estate business, administration, education and health, and social services (ibid). Agriculture is the only field which is counted in the Labor Force Survey with major statistics in the country, to include women's economic contribution.

According to the Labor force Survey (2003-04), women in Pakistan are engaged in different activities as Agriculture, forestry, and fishing (67.3%), manufacturing (14.7 %), sale and retail trade (1.75), transport, storage and communication (0.1 %), construction (0.3%), community, social and personal services (15.8%).

In spite of everything, there is a traditional division of work in Pakistan with regard to women. Mostly they are indulged in agricultural labor in the rural areas and are acknowledged as teachers and in medical profession only in the urban areas. While in other fields, women are found rarely depending upon their educational level. Women are observable in the education sector in schools and colleges in almost all parts of the country.

Other than this, despite the fact that there is urbanization expansion, old fogey customary values are still deeply rooted in the society. Women job is

usually temporary as mostly it continues till their marriage. This scenario creates an atmosphere of women's dependency on men and supports the determination of a male oriented patriarchal culture. Women are recognized as mothers, daughter and sisters, but having no right to acquire property and position in society. There are not only the cultural factors, but also the establishment factors which are responsible for women economic conditions. The government has promised to provide equal economic opportunities to both men and women under its constitutional provisions, but the real side of the picture is quite dark. In one way, the government considers women as an unprivileged group, but does not provide any social security for them to uplift their socioeconomic condition. There is an informal zakat system prevails in the country which is insufficient to remove women's poverty.

Violence against Women

The societies where women face poor social status in education, income and health, it leads to the acceptance of violence, she confront by the society. There are different kinds of violence faced by women in Pakistan, including socio-economic violence, physical violence, forced marriages, honor killing, marriage to the Quran, rape, social and sexual harassment, acid and stove burnings, forced abortions, and murders. This situation is deeply rooted in culture in different parts of the country.

Girls have to marry by their parents will and never with their own choice. Usually they are sold or exchanged to reconcile the family and clan quarrels. They are also offered as "blood money", known as *Swarain* both cases, to settle down such delinquency such as murder and sexual and physical exploitation but boys do not have to face it (SOGP, 2009).

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (1996) explored that victimized women belong to poor and middle classes and because of this they are the victim of violence, further they are more defenseless to tyrannical customs and mores at home and in the society.

HRCP (1997) further reported that domestic violence remained an enclosed phenomenon. The female subordination and male hegemony is accepted as a part of the culture and even to have the religious sanction made by the violence by men against the women in diverse forms an accepted and approved act of domestic life.

The domestic violence shows the status of women in Pakistan within the familial domain. Some forms of violence in Pakistan are so deeply penetrated in the cultural roots that they are barely recognized as violence and largely accepted by the society (ADB, 2000).

In 1998, the woman's murder figure was 1,974 by the government and it was done by their own male family member. During the same year, the figure of rape cases was 706 in Punjab, out of which 55 percent of the sufferers were minors and half were target of gang rape (Zia & Bari, 1999). There is a series of protection and status empowerment laws for women in Pakistan since 1961. But violence cases in the country are still in observation on reported and unreported level.

Analysis

To end with, Pakistani women are at the rear than men in socio-economic issues. Here, a woman have a low literacy rate, live in underprivileged health stipulations, economically poor and reliant, face violence in the name of traditions and has no authority to make decisions. Her only strengthened status is that of a son's mother; which is not a sign of female empowerment but again patriarchal strength. At a glance, women seem to be in the vicious circle which is not promoting their strength in the society. But in actual, this status is not elevated by the government by itself. If the government opens girls' schools in each and every village of the country by its strong will, the literacy rate can be automatically raised in the country and same will be in the case of health care facilities.

Further, it is very strange that women are having this status in an Islamic ideological country; with policies and legislation even. Pakistan is a signatory of different international commitments to ensure gender equality as 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. Pakistan has also launched a National Plan of Action to implement the Beijing Platform of Action and a National policy for Empowerment and Development of Women 2002. Further there is a set of legislation regarding women status in Pakistan i.e. Muslim Family Law Ordinance, 1961; Articles 25, 27, 34, 35 and 37 of the Constitution 1973; Dowry and Bridal (restriction) Act 1976; The Offence of Zina (enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance 1979; The Protection of women (criminal laws amendment) Act 2006; Domestic Violence (prevention and protection) Act 2009; Protection against harassment of women

at work place Act 2010, and Acid Control and Acid Crime Act, 2011. But the law is still unable to defend women from violence in Pakistan.

There is an obvious gap between the policy making in the country and their implementation mechanism. It is observed that policies regarding women in Pakistan are not implemented in its true letter and spirit. There are a number of underline reasons behind this gap. Firstly, the social policies are made at federal level and are funded by the government. The administrative machinery has to rely on the allocated budget and as the budget ended the social policy implementation comes to an end. But there is another side of the picture that there is embezzlement of funds by the state machinery and a very little is left for an oppressed group whose welfare is aimed through this policy. So it can be said that there is a catch 22 situation in Pakistan which creates a gap between policy making and its implementation.

Secondly, Pakistan has faced high political instable atmosphere since last six decades. Even, there was high political instability in the country from 1989 to 1999, when the country faces a good deal through the two party systems. No government completed its single tenure of five years. Ultimately social policy faced the hazardous results regarding its implementation. As one government started one social policy, it was cut shorted by the next government with in the same five year plans and no policy could be implemented to benefit the masses in the country.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude, the practices of these policies are hardly seen and failures are visible due to government will in non-allocation of budget. Poor governance, political instability and embezzlement of funds by the government machinery are the additional endeavors, which cause the policy failure; hence increasing poor women status in the country.

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