

State of women in Balochistan

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In spite of being commonly liberal, politically conscious, and culturally well-endowed, resource-rich Balochistan is Pakistan's least-developed province with high rates of infant and maternal mortality, poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition.

Although are suffering due to the inflexible culture, customs and practices throughout Pakistan women, there is a larger story to tell about the state-sponsored discrimination against women in Balochistan.

From the beginning Islamabad has outrageously tried to cover up its ill-conceived and discriminatory policies by blaming the Baloch themselves for their appalling state. However, facts and findings on health, education, communication, political empowerment and economic development clearly indicate that human development in Balochistan has been deliberately ignored by successive central governments, to gain strategic benefits out of the vast and geostrategic location of the province and its immense resources. Women are discriminated against in the country at large. But in Balochistan they are discriminated against by state. They have no access to enabling opportunities required for the empowerment of women in any modern and civilised society.

Under Article 25 of the Constitution, and of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), women are entitled to a number of economic and social rights, such as rights to food, social security, housing, education, an adequate standard of living, and healthcare. But policy commitments have hardly been translated in to practice.

The endless military operation, internal displacement, disappearances, intimidation and the prolonged Baloch-Islamabad conflict are hitting hard the already deprived women in the province. Central government discriminatory policy is not only resulting in slowdown of gender empowerment but its effecting overall social and economic development process in province.

The most devastating consequence of underdevelopment in any society is a high fatality rate. Balochistan has highest infant and maternal mortality ratio (MMR), compared to that many Asian and African underdeveloped countries. For example, the MMR in Karachi is 281 compared to 673 in rural Balochistan. Pakistan's chief planning health officer told IRIN in June 2007 that "the maternal mortality ratio is 650 per 100,000 live births in Balochistan - nearly two times the national average,".

The increasing rate of preventable maternal mortality is a symptom of the larger social injustice of discrimination against women and violation of women's human rights. Thousands of avoidable maternal deaths each year indicate the government's unfaithfulness to domestic and international laws. The expert has indicated the basic lack of safe drinking water and sanitation as major cause of infant and maternal mortality in the province. The Pakistan Living Standard Measurement Survey (PSLM), 2004-5, identifies sharp a interprovincial disparity with regard to access to safe drinking water. Reports state that 52 per cent of the population in Balochistan uses wells and open ponds for drinking water, compared to three per cent in Punjab, 13 per cent in Sindh and 35 per cent in NWFP. Balochistan's women played a vital political and human rights role during the current conflict in the province. The Baloch Women's Panel very bravely organised a number of protests,

rallies and sit-ins in front of the press clubs in Quetta, Karachi and Turbat against arbitrary arrests and for the release of missing Baloch activists.

Despite being a signatory of major international conventions, Islamabad continues to ignore the basic rights of women to education in Balochistan. Planned discrimination remains to deprive the majority of girls the right to knowledge in Balochistan.

Access to all levels of education is crucial to empowering women and girls to participate in economic, social and political life of their societies. Education unlocks a woman's potential, and is accompanied by improvements in health, nutrition, and well-being of their families. The PSLM survey reported alarming regional disparity in education sector. According to the survey only 27 per cent of the students in Balochistan complete primary or higher education, compare to 64 per cent in Punjab. The increasing dropout rate is due to the unavailability of middle- and high schools.

Islamabad is totally inactive and ignorant about the need to reduce or remove the interprovincial gender disparity and bring the neglected women of Balochistan at par with rest of the provinces. Interprovincial gender inequality in employment sector is unspeakable. According to State Bank of Pakistan's 2005-06 report Balochistan and the NWFP have the highest rate of female unemployment rate of 27 per cent and 29 per cent, compared to seven per cent and 20 per cent for Punjab and Sindh.

A large number of women's vocational and training centres in Punjab make women more capable and confident to qualify for market jobs. Punjab has 111 women's vocational institutes, however Balochistan has only one. Due to the lack of girls' schools in the province only 23 per cent rural girls are lucky enough to be enrolled in primary as compared to 47 per cent in rural Punjab. In fact, acute poverty at the margin appeared to be hitting hardest at women. As long as women's access to healthcare, education, and training remain limited, prospects for improved social status of female population will remains bleak.

The Social Policy Development Centre 2005 report discovered that the percentage of the population living in a high degree of deprivation stands at 88 per cent in Balochistan, 51 per cent in the NWFP, 49 per cent in Sindh and 25 per cent in Punjab. According to poverty-related reports the percentage of the population living below the poverty line stands at 63 per cent in Balochistan, 26 per cent in Punjab, 29 per cent in the NWFP and 38 per cent in Sindh.

No development policy could succeed unless it is based on the needs and participation of people in the process. In Balochistan's case, what people need is socio-economic development, political empowerment, clean drinking water, electricity, practical education, basic health facilities, proper roads and infrastructure connecting rural towns to the main centres. But central government is doing the opposite. The Baloch are subject to extreme discrimination. No state in the present era singles out its citizen on the basis of region and ethnicity. The regime in Islamabad must respect Baloch rights and stop its systematic discriminatory policies.

P.S.

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