

For women's empowerment

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AS a welcome change, this year's May Day celebrations, demonstrations and debates gave considerable space not only to the challenges faced by women workers but also to the bitter struggle the women of this country have been forced to wage for realising their elementary rights.

The list of these challenges is quite long and formidable: denial of right to work, non-recognition of women's work, non-payment for work done by women, denial of a fair wage, gaps in the legislation needed to protect women's rights, non-implementation of laws that have already been enacted, non-recognition of informal-sector workers, and, above all, prevalence of an environment that perpetuates and reinforces gender inequality by the day.

Some of these issues are already on the official agenda. For instance, the demands of home-based workers for their entitlements. The organisations working for them estimate their number at 8.5 million but they could be more. Most of them are women. They are among the worst exploited category of workers. Unexceptionable are their demands for the ratification of ILO Convention 189, for domestic legislation required for their recognition as workers, and for creation of a monitoring system to ensure that what the law provides for is actually available to them.

Even a cursory look at the problems faced by women will reveal that they are interrelated and interdependent.

The Punjab government has at least promised acceptance of their demands and now it is being pressed to honour its word. There is no reason why home-based workers should be obliged to keep marching under a blazing sun for the most basic of their rights.

The fact that organised labour has been in a state of retreat for quite some time means that the grievances of women in the civil labour force have been multiplying. They will continue to suffer more than all-male trade unions as the ruling elite is unlikely to be cured of its obsession with free-market mantras, including the shady deals under the cover of privatisation.

Even a cursory look at the problems faced by women will reveal that they are interrelated and interdependent. Each problem has been aggravated by lack of state will to resolve it.

The time has perhaps come to remove this main obstacle to women's freedom by demonstrating the state's will to go the whole length for achieving gender equality by adopting a long-term plan

for women's empowerment. What this goal means should largely be decided by women themselves. During the interregnum the state and civil society should concentrate on building up women's capacity to cover the final lap to their rightful place in society.

The long-term strategy will obviously include a mechanism for filling gaps in legislation as well as for evaluating implementation of pro-women laws made over the past two decades, and especially since 2004, in order to make their enforceability certain. In order to ensure women's ability to grab their share of jobs it will be necessary to extend to them educational facilities and an adequate health cover. The failure to realise the Millennium Development Goals must spur the administration to improve its performance while addressing the Strategic Development Goals.

An important factor of women's emancipation can be an increase in their role in local government institutions. The Sindh government's decision to increase women's representation in local bodies to 33pc is worthy of emulation by other provinces. But symbolic representation will not be enough; the women local leaders must be helped to address all of citizens' problems, including their vulnerability to preachers of hate and promoters of conflict.

Instead of creating new vehicles for promoting women's empowerment, the task can be assigned to the national and provincial commissions on the status of women after enlarging their scope of work and guaranteeing them the physical and material resources required. Besides developing and executing their three- or five-year programmes they should also function as tribunals to receive and address women's grievances about the denial of their due.

Death of a scholar-bureaucrat

Our none-too-prosperous world of letters has been rendered poorer by the passing away of Fazlur Rahman Khan of the Pakistan Administrative Service who served the country for long years in various capacities, most notably as principal secretary to President Ghulam Ishaq Khan.

Fazlur Rahman Khan found his urge to express himself on a variety of socioeconomic issues blunted by his service code of conduct. Learning of this, Mr Mahmoud Abdullah Haroon, the then federal interior minister and with whom Fazlur Rahman Khan was working, urged him to write under an assumed name and if nothing else he could use his initials as his byline.

Thus it was that Dawn started publishing regular columns by MAH. These covered a wide area of issues in politics, history, sociology and culture that were remarkable not only for the writer's breadth of scholarship and incisive reasoning but also for the fluency of the columns' prose and style. It was only after Mahmoud Haroon's death in 2008 that he revealed in his final column the person behind the byline MAH, by way of acknowledging his debt to the departed benefactor.

Fazlur Rahman Khan belonged to a long line of public servants who did not allow their duties in areas of civil administration or dispensation of justice or even in police/military service to suppress their creative talent and found time to enrich contemporary literature.

The line may not have entirely dried up but it is perhaps necessary to remind the managers of academies and schools for training civil servants that they must encourage the budding civil servants to take an interest in the literature, languages and arts of their people. This will help them develop into wholesome personalities and augment the country's literary and cultural capital. This should also enable them to better discharge their duties and thus promote good governance. Sensitive and cultured public servants are perhaps more essential to a just dispensation than Plato's philosopher kings.

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