

## Women empowerment possible only thru polls

Speakers urge political leadership to enhance reserved quota for women, fund election campaigns of interested female candidates

OUR STAFF REPORTER

ISLAMABAD - Representatives of various political parties urged their leadership to reserve quota for women on general election seats and finance their election campaigns who are interested in contesting the coming elections. They also recommended to the Election Commission of Pakistan that it must announce the election null and void in the constituencies where number of women voters is less than 10 per cent in the elections.

Aurat Foundation, in collaboration with Parliamentarians Commission for Human Rights (PCHR), organised a National Consultation on Women's Empowerment in Political Parties' Election Manifestos, here on Wednesday. The main objective of the consultation was to hold dialogue with political parties' representatives to incorporate the Handbook recommendations into their manifestos.

The Handbook titled 'Suggestions on Women's Empowerment for Election Manifestos of Political Parties', has been co-authored by Naheed Aziz and Tahira Abdullah, the development practitioners and rights ac-

tivists.

Chair of the consultation Riaz Fatyana, Chairperson, Standing Committee on Human Rights, while emphasizing on women's economic empowerment, he said that the political parties shall ensure increase in women's quota in employment more than 10 percent. He also pointed out that on reserve seats less women came from urban areas compared to rural areas, while considering the rate of women's education it should have been otherwise.

While he appreciated the fact that all of women on reserve seats, except Khushbakht Shujaat, came from rural areas. He also emphasized that political parties will bring more women from urban areas. He recommended to the Election Commission of Pakistan that it must announce the election null and void in the constituencies where number of women voters is less than 10 per cent.

He also recommended that at least one-fourth of all the parties' office bearers shall be given to their women members, and similarly one-fourth of all the ministries etc shall be given to women.

Activist Tahira Abdullah demanding an

end to perceiving reserved seats, quotas, advocated that political parties should allocate tickets for women to contest elections directly on general seats, as democracy should not be about 'electability' and 'winnability', but it is all about inclusion and fair play and women's participation is the result of their long struggle for political, legal and socio-economic rights.

She emphasized the need for a fresh census, and demanded that the census should not be termed 'mardum shumari' but 'insaana-shumaari' or 'fard-shumaari' as the census is not only the counting of men and boys, but also women and girls.

She emphasized the need to focus on the 'feminization of poverty', unemployment, health, girls' education, and the rising tide of Talibanization, jihadism, extremism and terrorism.

Senator Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo of National Party in his remarks agreed that the manifestos of political parties do need a lot of addition and improvement.

While pointing to the increasing extremism in Pakistani society, he said not a single party's manifestos includes a mention of 'secularism', and due to wrong translation

of the word 'secularism' in Urdu as 'la-deeeniyat' (atheism), rather than the separation of state and religion, it is very misleading and one of the causes of extremism/theocracy in Pakistan.

Mehnaz Rafi from Pakistan Tahrik-e-Insaf, in her remarks said that most of the political parties ignore the issues of women's rights at the most crucial times.

"For example, all the political parties gave cold response to the popular demand of repealing of Hudood Ordinances". Malai-ka Raza, member of Pakistan Tahrik-e-Insaf (PTI)'s Manifesto Committee, informed her party has ensured at least 20 per cent participation of women at all the party level or committees and hence they are very active in shaping PTI's manifestos and other policies.

Farah Aqil, Senator from ANP, while talking about the women's presence in political parties, agreed that although the situation is not very good in her own party, but leaders of her party believe in bringing more women in the parties and in the parliaments.

Khushbakht Shujaat, MNA from MQM, said that one of the major reasons behind discrimination against women is the 'neem-

mulaeat' (so-called religious-ism) as whenever there is a talk of women's rights, religious leaders brings in the religion to oppose women's right to property, politics and economic empowerment.

She further said that in order to change the mindset towards women's rights, there is a need to increase education, secular education and also promote national cultural celebrations, poetry, singing etc.

Mir Khursheed Jamal Deeni, from Balochistan National Party (BNP) in his remarks said that violence and terrorism, continued since the times of General Musharraf, has drastically affected women's rights in Balochistan.

He said that while talking about women's rights, political parties must ensure the human rights in Balochistan as well as in other parts of the country. He said that situation of women is worst in Balochistan compared to other areas.

Agha Hassan from BNP while pointing out the issues of 'missing persons' in Balochistan, said that women and children are the most affected by the issue of missing persons.

Anwar Soomro, General Secretary of

Awami Tahrik Sindh, said that his party, under the leadership of Rasool Bux Palijo, was the first party to establish a political party for Sindhi women, called Sindhianni Tahreek. While condemning the cases of 'honor' killings, forced marriages, forced religious conversions of Hindus etc in Sindh, he blamed that all the political parties are responsible for this discriminatory and violent practices against women. He stressed that there would be no change unless people / women from grassroots come into politics. He also demanded that instead of 17 percent or 33 percent quota for women in the parliaments, there shall be 50 percent quota for women on reserved seats.

Enwar Baig, Senator from PML-N, Fauzia Naz, representative from PML-Q, Suriya Amiruddin, Senator from PPP, Amiruddin, Shaikh Mansoor, Secretary General of PPP's Human Rights Committee, Naef Mirza, Chief Operating Officer Aurat Foundation, Ch. Shafique from PCHR, Naheed Aziz, Anisa Zeb Tahirkheli, from Qaumi Watan Party, Balochistan, Dr Ishaque Baloch, from National Party, Balochistan, Nuzhat Sadiq, Senator from PML-N also spoke on the event.