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Conference on women, peace and social harmony

# Speakers demand gender reforms, implementation of pro-women laws

■ Allama Tahir Ashrafi says peace, social harmony are impossible in a country where religion has become a tool to achieve personal, political goals

By Kiyya Qadir Baloch

**ISLAMABAD:** To highlight the issues of inter-faith harmony and rights of women at the national level, AAWAZ, in collaboration with five well-known civil society organisations - the Aurat Foundation, South Asia Partnership-Pakistan, Strengthening Participatory Organisation, Sungi Development Foundation and Sustainable Development Policy - held a national conference on women, peace and social harmony on Monday.

The conference was chaired by National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) Chairwoman Khawar Mumtaz, while speakers included Federal Secretary for Law, Justice and Human Rights Barrister Zafarullah Khan,

Justice (r) Nasira Javed Iqbal, Pakistan Ulema Council Chairman Allama Tahir Ashrafi, Provincial Commission on the Status of Women Chairwoman Neelam Toru, Naeem Mirza from Aurat Foundation and Sajid Mansoor Qaisrani from the Sungi Development Foundation.

The speakers demanded gender reforms, implementation of pro-women laws and enactment of legislation on domestic violence. The conference started with the welcome note by Sajid Mansoor Qaisrani.

Speaking on the occasion, he said that justice could never be established in society unless women who constitute half the population were freed

from violence.

Anbreen Ajaib shared a brief history of 16 days of activism campaign and its relevance with the current socio-political situation of women in Pakistan.

Naeem Mirza addressing the participants said that the women's ministry had been devolved, so the NCSW must be represented in the cabinet. He said that the National Commission for Human Rights should be established without any further delay.

He regretted that the Ministry of Human Rights had been downgraded to a wing in the Ministry of Law and Justice.

He pointed out that the gender crime cell was an ineffective body as only two out of 22 vacancies had been filled. "The representation of women in the parliament and local governments had been reduced, which is worrisome," he noted.

Qaisrani said that although the local government in Balochistan retained 33 per cent of women seats, women were not allowed to vote in some areas.

"Why there is no follow-up on GRAP recommendations, the National Plan of Action 1997 and the National Policy of 2002," he questioned. He demanded that all discriminatory legislations against women and religious minorities must be repealed.

Barrister Zafarullah while agreeing that there were still many areas that need improvement

expressed the view that things had improved at many levels.

He said that there were more women lawyers and judges in the country and the women were more active in public life in general.

"Unless we have justice for all, there will be no justice in society," he said. He said the role of law was limited as compared to customs, values and norms. He said that his ministry was working to push forward the bills related to laws of marriages and divorce, for Christians and Hindu citizens. He also said that the domestic violence bill should be adopted by the parliament as soon as possible.

Allama Tahir Ashrafi said that peace and social harmony were not possible in a country where religion had become a tool to achieve personal and political goals.

He criticised the government for appeasing banned organisations. "Laws exist to discourage hate speech and promote religious tolerance in Pakistan, but are not implemented. Things will not improve until the citizens stand up and reclaim the space that has been appropriated by ignorant and retrogressive forces who use religion for political purposes," he said.

He said that it was difficult for him to handle the situation emerging after Salmaan Taseer's assassination, as well as issues about Hindu girls' marriages and

the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) ruling regarding DNA testing. "The Pakistan Ulema Council is trying to reclaim the true spirit of Islam which stands for peace, tolerance and equality among men and women."

He said that Islam preaches that there should be no violence against women, children, the elderly persons and non-combatants, yet women and children were murdered in Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta and Karachi in the name of jihad.

Justice Nasira threw light on the history of Qisas and Diyat laws. She said that Qisas and Diyat law had also been reviewed by the NCSW, which also suggested that they be repealed.

Neelam Toru said that women faced a lot of socio-political barriers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. She said that literacy rate among girls was very low. "They are afraid to go to schools following the militant attacks on schools in KP."

She also said that the provincial commission on the status of women was seeking to have marriage certificates registered and raising awareness on the importance of women's right to divorce.

Khawar Mumtaz said that despite several difficulties, especially threats from terrorists and extremists, the struggle for women's rights would continue.

She noted that laws were important but awareness at the local and national levels was also necessary.