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Story on Page 19

■ **WOMEN & GIRLS DANCING AT SIT-INS**

Aurat Foundation castigates campaign against negative portrayal of women

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Among burning issues highlighted through electronic, social and print media during sit-ins by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Pakistan Awami Tehreek, one issue that dominated all other topics was 'women and girls dancing on the beat of party songs.'

The issue made part of all speeches, statements and images used as a strong argument by apparently educated political leaders against each other's party. Social media was stormed

with real and imitated images of women dancing in political gatherings while comparing their participation in these political gatherings with taking part in dance parties.

"More people attend these sit-ins to watch dancing women," was a common argument used against the protesting parties on social media. Whereas, workers of protesting parties used images of women dancing in the PML-N 'jalsas' and Punjab youth festivals as counter argument, again humiliating women and girls who dared to break the taboos and

tried to join mainstream.

"No one discussed the way men dance in such public gatherings. Is it their birth rights to do as they please," challenged Shumaila Tarvir, a women rights activist. "Women also have the right to express their sentiments. I request general public to stop publishing or sharing such posts on social media," she said.

A statement issued by Aurat Foundation on Thursday condemned the trend of criticising and abusing the conduct of women and girls taking part in sit-ins and protests in the

speeches of political leaders, social media posts and electronic media reports.

While also appreciating women's participation in political activities, the statement urged political leaders not to abuse and humiliate women participants of these gathering in their public speeches as an instrument to thrash other political parties as it would have a long lasting impact on women political participation in the country. "We believe that women in our society, are always discouraged to freely participate in mainstream politics.

Negatively judging their conduct has always been the biggest tool in the hands of Pakistan's typical patriarchal mindset to restrict the participation of women in political activities," the statement points out.

It also mentions that focus of electronic media on dresses and activities of women fuels patriarchal and extremist mindset looking for a reason to restrict women from political participation. "We request media to keep in mind the vulnerabilities of women while reporting and encourage women who dare to join political movements on

streets." The statement says that after closely observing the statements issued by different politicians and abusing posts frequently shared on social media, the organisation considers it a responsibility of all civilised people to discourage such trends. It points out that character assassination of women political workers is one of the biggest hurdles in the way of active participation of women in mainstream politics.

Besides that, the AF demands senior women leaders and Parliamentarians from all political parties should also be

made part of the current negotiations and decision making process. "The exclusion of women from important consultations is so deeply ingrained in our political culture that change is unlikely without a conscious, deliberate effort to involve them." Talking to 'The News', a university student Shayan Zahid questioned the same mindset. "It was disturbing to watch these images. Is it a crime if women and girls participate in festivals and political gatherings? I considers this harassment against women," she said.

On the other hand, Women Action Forum (WAF), in its statement termed it impressive that a large number of women participated in recent political activities. "They have broken taboos preventing women from occupying public spaces. Mobility of women of all classes is severely restricted in the name of tradition and fear of conservative backlash. That politically disengaged citizens now want to engage in mainstream politics is a welcome sign," said the statement.