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'No society can progress if it suppresses its female component'

Home / Today's Paper / Karachi / No society can progress if it suppresses its female component

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Mehnaz Rehman blames retrogressive values such as male chauvinism for LHWs' plight

"Our dilemma right now is not as much poverty as it is lack of social justice," Mehnaz Rehman, the resident director for the Aurat Foundation's Sindh chapter, said on Monday.

She was addressing a consultation on the problems of lady health workers (LHWs) and the injustices being meted out to them on account of various social factors.

"We should struggle for electoral reforms whereby the common folk, the disempowered can also contest the elections," she said. "This will be an ideal way to wipe out injustice."

She blamed retrogressive values such as male chauvinism for LHWs' plight. She also lamented that the gap between the rich and the poor in Pakistan was burgeoning with every passing day and that was what caused injustices to women.

Begum Surayya Amiruddin, former Pakistan Peoples Party senator from Balochistan, said it was sad that even though women formed 52 per cent of the country's population, they were victims of atrocities at the hands of male chauvinists.

She asserted that there was no hope for a society that treated its women as inferior beings and that women had to go side by side with men if the country was to flourish.

She lamented that even though Benazir Bhutto had formed the lady health visitors' force in 1994, and children began to be vaccinated, she was not allowed to live to see the fruition of the programme.

The force, she said, was regularised in 2012. However, she regretted that Benazir could not live to see the complete implementation of the plan.

She reiterated that if a country were to progress, it had to treat the female component of the population as an equal and march hand-in-hand with them.

LHWs were present in large numbers and put forth their complaints and problems. One of the problems, they said, was the issue of delayed and meagre salaries, which exerted excruciating pressures on their family life which, apart from other things, led to domestic violence.

Apart from other things, they said, they suffered from low self-esteem. Fifty-seven per cent of the LHWs said that given their rickety financial position, they were often forced to borrow from local retailers and by the time they received their emoluments, the retailers were at their doorsteps to pester them for repayment of their loans and financially they were back to square one, which led to family problems.

An LHW, Shama Noorani, said that by implication the NGOs were to blame because the government had all the required tasks accomplished by them and the LHWs' hard work went by default.

All the LHWs complained of sexual harassment and some said that even applying lipstick was misconstrued by the male staff as a sign of being footloose. They said that all sorts of allegations were levelled against them by men.

Earlier, noted journalist Moniza Inam's report on LHWs' problems – such as sexual harassment, delayed salaries and domestic violence – was read out. The report included problems such as going to "uncovered areas" where the uninitiated people were hostile and often LHWs were molested.

Noted labour leader Habibuddin Junaidi said it was not just the workers and the peasants who were exploited by the feudals, but women too. He said women had to cope with the extra curse of sexual harassment.

Junaidi said the poor, the lower-middle classes and the middle classes would have to put up a concerted struggle to throw off the yoke of exploitation. He said that no society could progress if it meted out stepmotherly treatment to its women.