



M. Younis Khalid

Photo by Tanveer Shehzad

Need for affirmative action

M. Younis Khalid is an internationally renowned expert on gender issues. He is currently serving as a director of strategic planning, monitoring and finance at Aurat Foundation. Here, he speaks about the status of women employment in Pakistan.

In comparison to international standards and those of other Muslim countries, how does Pakistan fare in providing employment opportunities to its women?

Obviously, compared to industrialised countries, Pakistan lags behind in women employment statistics. It is important to consider that employment trends vary across different sectors

in the country. Fewer women are employed in the public sector, while most employed women tend to be in the private sector, in only a few stratified industries. This is in spite of an imposition of a 10 per cent quota for women employment by the government, as only two per cent of the public sector employment is held by women, which is a really low figure.

Even in the public sector, where women are employed, they tend to not reach higher positions, as most administrative and higher level jobs are occupied by men. Nonetheless, compared to the standards in other Muslim countries, we do fare far better in public sector employment. In the private sector, the employment rates of women are much higher than most Middle Eastern countries but Far Eastern Muslim countries, like Malaysia have much higher private sector employment for women. We do, however, have a much higher percent-

age of women being employed at higher positions in the private sector, in comparison to Malaysia and most Muslim countries.

What typical impediments do women face when seeking employment and while working?

Women face a plethora of hurdles while employed or seeking it. Stigma and discrimination do play a central role in undermining employment for women, yet there are other problems, too. Within these, lack of physical infrastructure is a key factor. Women often find accessibility to workplace and job opportunities rather difficult, regardless of social attitudes. No such channel is in place where women can search for employment without using social sources and word of mouth.

An absence of public transport system fit for women makes it difficult for women to commute.

This is worsened by a lack of toilets built especially for women. Other hurdles also include inaccessibility to day care centres and maternity leave. Unlike most developed countries, our women are expected to take care of children disproportionately more than men, which create a disparity of responsibility and power between them. As such, many highly skilled women tend to lose many years of their working life since they have to raise children. Such cultural responsibility on women is a waste of not only their skills, talents and knowledge but also social benefits derived from highly skilled work.

Is there a significant varying pattern of employed women in different sectors and industries?

Absolutely, as I mentioned before, women are employed in a stratified group of industries and they tend to flourish in those. These sectors usu-

ally include health and teaching, NGOs, fashion and advertisement. A substantial percentage of our women population is employed in rural and informal sector such as farming, embroidery and handicrafts amongst many others.

Unfortunately, women either receive no salary and income for such jobs as their output is passed to men or the employment is not included in national statistics. Increasingly, women are also employed in the manufacturing sector, as they demand lower salaries and tend to have a higher output in some jobs. Recently, women are also finding their way into armed forces, traffic police and aviation, which is a progressive development in our country.

What do you think can be done at a governmental policy level to reduce hurdles faced by employed women and those seeking employment?

There is a need to incorporate 'affirmative action' in the governmental policy to ensure that policy mitigates levels of low employment rate for women. Such a strategy would require use of quotas not only in governmental and private organisations but also into positions of administrative power. Workplaces should also be more gender sensitive in their culture and architecture and the government should oversee such a transition through enacting laws. I feel that to achieve such a transition, having women in decision-making positions in large organisations is paramount, as they can best serve the interest of their gender. ■—Sachal Abbassi