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Gender disparity big challenge: PM

Dawn Report

ISLAMABAD, March 8: Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani on Tuesday said the government was fully cognizant of the problems being faced by women in their domestic as well as national life.

Speaking at a ceremony organised by the Ministry of Women Development to mark the centenary of International Women's Day, Mr Gilani said no society can move forward without undoing its discriminatory attitudes and laws against women. Discrimination against women weakens society as a whole, he added. "The government has taken significant initiatives for the social, political and economic empowerment of women."

The prime minister said the government was determined to implement, in letter and spirit, the vision of Benazir Bhutto despite the great challenges of extremism being faced today.

He said the government would not bow to extremists who believed in destroying girls' schools.

Mr Gilani said gender inequality remained a big challenge to socio-economic development in Pakistan as the female participation rate in labour force was only 21 per cent compared to 69 per cent for males. About 65 per cent of the female labour force is engaged as family workers who work without pay in cash or in kind. Though about 74 per cent women are engaged in the agriculture sector, unemployment rate of female labour force is twice that of the men.

The government's commitment to a strong legislative cover to address women issues is evident through the measures it has taken so far. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2009 has been enacted along with Protection



CIVIL society activists participate in a walk held in connection with the International Women's Day on Jinnah Avenue in Islamabad on Tuesday.

— Photo by G.A. Zaidi

against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act last year.

A draft Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill is also in the process of enactment. Discriminatory laws are being amended in collaboration with the National Commission on the Status of Women, NGOs and members of the civil society.

"We are committed to providing a conducive environment to the working women so that they can be able to join the workforce with confidence and without fear." The government has allocated necessary funds for the construction of two hostels for working women in Islamabad, he said.

Mr Gilani said Benazir Income

Support Programme was providing financial support directly to the women of poor households.

He congratulated the speaker of the National Assembly for taking the initiative to launch the Women Caucus of 90 parliamentarians and said these committed parliamentarians were addressing the agenda of women development and em-

powerment across party lines for betterment of the women in Pakistan.

WALK: Civil society activists, teachers, schoolchildren and people from different walks of life participated in a walk held in connection with the women's day. The walk organised by Insani Haqooq Ittehad started from Khusum Plaza and ended at the

Constitution Avenue. The participants were carrying placards inscribed with different slogans highlighting the struggle of women.

Speaking on the occasion, civil society activist Farzana Bari said Pakistani women had long been fighting for their rights. She said there was no major change relating to the rights of the women. Ms Bari said all-out efforts were needed on part of the government to contain the spill-over of extremism and violence in society which was also affecting the women.

Mumtaz Alam Gilani, a former federal minister for human rights, said Islam was a religion of peace and gave full protection to the women.

He said the government had initiated efforts to address the concerns of women. Other speakers called for an early approval of the 'Domestic Violence Bill' which was still pending in parliament.

A charter of demands presented on the occasion called for gender equality, balance between administration and country's justice system, freedom of press and separation of religion and politics. Establishment of cultural and educational institutions, more provincial autonomy, agricultural reforms and a ban on weapons were also included in the charter.

A short-theatre performance was also given by Pattan's theatre group highlighting the issues faced by flood-affected women.

Civil society activists also sang songs relating to women's struggle for their rights.

Meanwhile, a function was hosted by a non-governmental organisation at Kuch Khaas to celebrate the women's day. Speakers on the occasion highlighted career opportunities for women in various industries.