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Our correspondent
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■ NATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Women have courage, capability to be productive segment of society

To pay tribute to women's leadership at grassroots level, Aurat Foundation (AF) in collaboration with Oxfam-GB jointly organised a public event on the occasion of National Women's Day.

The event was titled 'Women's Leadership at Grassroots Level: Actions and Achievements.' An icon of struggle and courage in Pakistan and abroad, Mukhtaran Mai, was the chief guest on the occasion.

Representatives of the Women's Leaders' Group from 30 districts across the country participated in the event and shared their stories of struggle for gender equality and political rights. Women's Leader Group is a group of fifty women leaders from thirty districts of Pakistan. Aurat Foundation, under its programme 'Raising Her Voice', is providing leadership training opportunities for these women leaders.

While addressing the participants, representative of Women's Leaders Group from Bhakkar Riffat Khan gave a detailed account of her activities regarding the emergency relief work for women affected by recent floods. She said that all women need is the support from the family and society. "Otherwise, they have all the courage and capability to become productive segment of the society," she added.

Qamar Bano from Jacobabad while telling her story of struggle stated that she had facilitated women of her constituency in getting their National Identity Cards (NICs). She also talked about the discrimination faced by Hindu community in her area and the resistance she faced in facilitating Hindus for registration.

Parliament urged to remove discriminatory laws against women

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The speakers at a talk on National Women's Day urged the parliament to claim its right of lawmaking and remove all discriminatory laws, which are recommended or imposed by other institutions.

The event was organised by the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), Potohar Organisation for Development and Advocacy (Poda) and Aurat Foundation (AF) at the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA). The women on the occasion termed the existing discriminatory laws an outcome of extremist policies by the Zia-ul-Haq regime. They said that the law making was solely the right of the parliament, but this right has been hijacked many years ago.

Addressing on the occasion, NCSW Chairperson Anis Haroon said that women have to face discrimination in the name of religion, customs, tradition and extremism. "Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani has promised to announce the autonomous status of NCSW on

March 8 after which the commission would play its effective role to end discriminatory laws," he added.

She said that there was a need to be more vigilant for legislation on women's rights. "The NCSW, after getting autonomous status, will constitute more and more affective family laws. In addition to it, it plans to constitute laws for the rights of women belonging to minority communities," she added.

She informed that the efforts to table the law against domestic violence in National Assembly were underway.

A famous novelist, Zahida Hina, said that the state of women deteriorated when Zia-ul-Haq omitted all articles regarding equal rights of men and women. She said that the state of women was deteriorating in the country with every passing day. "The cases of honour killing are more than before, women have been deprived from their right to vote in many areas, the literacy rate among women is declining," she said.

Adviser to the Prime Minister on Social Sector Shahnaz Wazir Ali said that the struggle for the rights of women has

just begun. "There were only a few women when we started this movement, but now we have a lot with us in this mission," she stated.

A legal expert, Salman Raja, said that the true democratic spirit was missing in our country as we have handed over solutions of our thoughts to institutions.

The women, including Rahana Nasreen, Surraya Manzoor, Nasreen Nasir and Zahida Memon, shared their success stories on the occasion. The famous poem — 'Aadhi Gawahi' by Rahana Nasreen — infused the spirit of activism among the audience.

Famous singer Fareeha Pervaiz sang two famous 'ghazals' by Faiz Ahmed Faiz — 'Aaj Bazaar Mein' and 'Hum Daikhain Gay'.

Awards were also distributed among women for excelling in their respective fields and becoming an inspiration for other women. The names of award-winners included All Pakistan Lady Health Workers President Bushra Arain, Mukhtaran Mai, athlete Naseem Hameed, women's rights activist Rakhshanda Naz, Samar Minallah and Dr. Quratulain.

for raising awareness against 'honour' killing and domestic violence against women.

Representative of Women's Leaders' Group Surraya Manzoor from Gujranwala said that as women councillors, they faced discrimination as compared to men councillors in terms of development funds. She spoke against the discrimination in the budget session as got the funds approved for all women councillors in the area.

Advocate Supreme Court Sarkar Abbass, member District Public Safety Commission, said that women lawyers still face discrimination in election of bar associations and are discouraged to contest election as office bearers. She urged women to cooperate with women and said that sometimes, it is the women that become hurdle in the way of other women.

Naeem Mirza, Chief Operating Officer read out an appeal made by Haleema Bhutto, a 'karo kari' victim, which demanded support for justice. He also shared with the participants that 'Insani Haqooq Itihad' (a network of Rawalpindi-Islamabad based NGOs, civil society organisations and human rights activists) would soon be taking up Haleema's appeal with the government and the courts. He also demanded the government of Pakistan to immediately hold elections of district government to put the system back in work.

While narrating the historical 'lathi charge' on women activists on February 12, 1983, Executive Director Sungi Development Organisation Samina Khan paid tributes to women leaders who started the struggle to end discriminatory laws against women. She herself

was present in the demonstration, which is now celebrated as National Women's Day each year.

Representative of Women's Leaders' Group from Rawalpindi Razia Sultana said that with the support of some civil society organisations and

NGOs, they have established a centre for education and skill development and have so far registered 600-700 girls who will get education till metric. She said that the stories of small contributions shared on this occasion would prove to be the true catalysts of

change. Razia Mudassar, Attock, while sharing her struggle with the participants said that despite being a brilliant student in school and college, she was forced out of education due to early marriage. She made a good name in district Attock