

Rights of widows, single women

Steps sought to eliminate discriminatory practices

OUR STAFF REPORTER

ISLAMABAD - The speakers at a consultative workshop on mainstreaming rights of widows and single women in public policy demanded of their governments to undertake all appropriate measures to eliminate existing discriminatory practices towards widows and provide them equal opportunities at all levels.

They also said that the Widows' Charter should be ratified by SAARC in order to validate it as a working model for the basis of all organizations in the region working for widows' empowerment.

Aurat Foundation, in collaboration with South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development (SANWED), is hosting a two-day South Asian consultative workshop here.

The workshop focuses on issues and challenges faced by widows and single women across South Asia and will aim at creating synergies and linkages at local, regional and international levels for mainstreaming their rights in public policy and

institutional frameworks. At the inaugural session Syeda Fiza Batool Gilani, Goodwill Ambassador for Women's Empowerment, and Qamar Zaman Kaira, Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, were the Guests of Honour.

Naeem Mirza, the Chief Operating Officer of Aurat Foundation, briefed the audience about four objectives of the consultation. Dr Mohini Thapa, Chairperson of Guild for Service, India, said that women can change the world and are the guaranty of peace.

While giving data on widows in India, she said that there are 40 million widows in India, which make 11% of total female population, while in contrast only 2.5% of total Indian men are widowers and that about 25% of widows are working outside home and 20% among them are working as agricultural labour.

Ms Semin Qasim, Programme Coordinator HAWA Programme, Afghanistan, elaborated the situation of widows in Afghanistan. Most of Afghanistan widows represent the poorest in the society, she said.

Afghanistan, she said, lack the safety nets, which mostly affect widows.

Ms Ferdous Ara Begum, Gender Issues Specialist, former member UN CEDAW Committee, Bangladesh, said that widowhood remain the most neglected among all human and women's rights issues. She said that in general widows in Bengal are little better placed as compared to those living in India, Nepal and Pakistan, but widows from the Hindu population in Bengal face more discrimination than the widows of other religio-ethnic groups.

Ms Nighat Said Khan, Executive Director, ASR Institute of Women Studies, in her address said that in order to gain legitimacy of patriarchy, men gained control of women's sexuality and reproductively. Widowed, with children, without children, divorced women with and without children, women who never married at all and who have no natal relations.

Cecilie Landsverk, Ambassador of Norway to Pakistan, in her inaugural address challenged the notion that widows needs nothing but to survive.



ISLAMABAD: A group photo of Goodwill Ambassador for Women Empowerment, Fiza Batool Gilani, with participants during SANWED South Asian consultative workshop on 'Mainstreaming Rights of Widows and Single Women in Public Policy' on Wednesday.--APP

She said that although much is improving reference to issues related to women e.g. violence against women, their representation in politics etc but when we

come to widows the scenario becomes very bleak. She suggested that widows shall be get into employment as it would not only liberate them but would also

empower them enough to play their role in economic development. She said that it is important to overhaul the inheritance laws to give widows their due

share in land.

Ms Anis Haroon, former Chairperson, National Commission on the Status of Women, Pakistan, while reference to the

presence of guests from South Asian countries, particularly India, she said that the peace process between India and Pakistan shall be enhanced and women shall be involved actively in the process.

She said that compared to widowed (whose husbands died), the divorced women are more stigmatised. She said that although some opportunities improved widows' status in urban areas, but situation in rural areas is much worse.

Ms. Hina Jilani, Director AGHS & former Special Representative of United Nations Secretary General for Human Rights Defenders, said that women would always rise whenever there is war and conflict in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

She said that the women's movement in Pakistan believes in creating new human rights ideas, as it believes in the supremacy of human rights, and women's rights as the basic for peace and development. She said that women's movement would strive for the rights of widows and single women.