

Friday, April 3, 2015

Two-day sensitisation workshop held for women parliamentarians

■ Women parliamentarians demand capacity building sessions on legislative business

Staff Report

BHURBAN: After spending two parliamentary years in their respective assemblies, most of women parliamentarians still lack information and capacity to introduce legislation and actively participate in the assemblies' business.

This was realised during a two-day sensitisation workshop when women parliamentarians complained lack of information and support and demanded capacity building sessions on legislative business.

Looking into parliamentary experience of the sitting women parliamentarians reveals that among a total of 211 women parliamentarians who joined the national and provincial assemblies after the General Election 2013, majority of them ie 144 joined in for the first time, and hence needed information and skills on legislative business.

Continuing its process of enhancing knowledge of newly elected women parliamentarians on legislative business and developing network mechanism among women caucus, Aurat Foundation organised a two-day sensitisation workshop of women parliamentarians on 'Legislative Business and Role of Parliamentarians in Pro-Women Legislation', from April 1-2 at Bhurban in Murree. The workshop was organised under its 'Gender Based Violence - Advocacy and Capacity Building' programme supported by Trocaire, the Australian government and Australian Aid.

National Assembly Joint Secretary (Legislation) Muhammad Mushtaq gave a detailed presentation on drafting and moving bills, resolutions and motions, raising 'calling attentions notices' and 'point of orders', putting questions and asking supplementary questions etc. His session also covered the pre- and post-introduction of bills eg how and where to get the support for drafting a bill; how to bring the bill on the assembly business; what if the bill is referred to a concerned standing committee; and what if a bill is dropped or lapsed.

PML-F's MPA from Sindh Assembly Nusrat Seher Abbasi complained that contrary to the practice in the National Assembly, Urdu translation of a bill is not provided to the members. Members of the National Assembly also complained that they faced

problems on submitting questions to be taken during the assembly sessions eg due to lesser time a lot of their questions are lapsed, and on Fridays the floors of the assembly leading to Notice Office (office for submitting questions) are blocked due to Friday prayers, whereas the time for submitting the questions during other weekdays is also limited.

Alluding to his observation that women parliamentarians usually do not utilise the available resources and support, Mushtaq urged the present members to benefit from the researchers and editors and other staff available for their support.

Aurat Foundation Manager Law and Gender Maliha Zia spoke on legislation and role of parliamentarians, women specific legislation in Pakistan, important factors for legislation, role of parliamentarians, and shifting from legislation to implementation. She said that women specific legislation in Pakistan is based on the 'Equality' clause in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Clause 25, Equality of citizens) which says that all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law.

She said that the Article specifically allows for laws which fall within the ambit of affirmative action eg the quotas for women or women and children specific laws to be passed without being deemed discriminatory. While describing the issues relating to legislation in Pakistan, she said that it was important to first recognise the constraints that legislators, especially female legislators faced in Pakistan. There must also be a discussion to determine what kind of legislation is required, she added. The major focus in Pakistan has been on criminalisation of different categories of violence. It is essential to avoid barriers to communication and try to make the law as accessible as possible, she further said.

The participants pointed out that passage of laws has been a great success but there has been poor implementation. One of the recommended methods for this purpose would be to focus attention on the different segments of the criminal justice system ie the police, medico-legal, lawyers, judges and jails.

While speaking on the networking and alliance building among women parliamentarians and their parliamentary caucuses, Dr Rakhshinda Parveen, Consultant and

Founder Creative Anger by Rakhshi, discussed the ethical, political tactics and strategies required for such alliance building. She suggested women parliamentarians to build strategic alliances as no one succeeds alone. "Adopt the mindset that relationship building is part of your job and development, know your big picture, blend the strategic and the tactical, don't ever treat people like 'strategies' or 'tactics'; know your communication style, build relationships before you need them, be approachable and be open to the possibilities," she said.

Aurat Foundation Chief Strategy and Policy Officer Younas Khalid spoke about the sustainable development goals and their history; the proposed 17 goals; how and why these goals were chosen; whether governments were happy about the proposed goals; if the number of goals were expected to be changed; how would the goals be funded; and when would these goals come into force.

PML-N's MNA and General Secretary Women Parliamentary Caucus (WPC), Shaista Pervaiz, said that although more pro-women laws were needed there was a strong need for effective implementation of these laws. While talking about her legislative experience, MQM's MNA Kishwar Zehra said that women member from opposition face a lot of obstacles in introducing bills, resolutions etc, as mostly the private member bills are ignored or dropped.

ANP Provincial General Secretary and former MNA Jamila Gilani, in response to other members' demand that women parliamentarians should be provided development funds, strongly opposed the demand and said that provision of development funds to even men parliamentarians be stopped. PML-N's MNA Shaheen Shafeeq suggested that in order to support and rehabilitate women victims of domestic violence, Women Parliamentary Caucus should establish its office in each district. Most of the parliamentarians present in the workshop demanded that more women should be given opportunity to contest elections on winnable general seats. Independent MNA Musarat Ahmadzeb even proposed to WPC that women's reserve seats be reduced and instead a quota on general seats created for women.