

■ 'WOMEN ALLIANCE PAKISTAN'

National network launched to focus on empowering women

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Islamabad

In connection with International Women Day, district level women leaders from across the country gathered in the National Press Club on Thursday to launch a national network with the name of Women Alliance Pakistan (WAP).

Supported by Aurat Foundation, the alliance will focus on empowering women in the rural areas, as well as low income and disadvantaged women; build their capacities to assume decision-making and leadership positions; raise their own voices in defence of their basic human rights; exercise their right to meaningful and effective political participation; access to resources and opportunities; inclusion of women's voices in improved governance and accountability of state institutions, with the purpose of eventually achieving goal of gender equality and gender justice.

The alliance is a continuation of the network of Aurat Foundation's Community

Women Leaders Groups formed in 2008. At that time, Aurat Foundation established groups of 50 women leaders per district, in 30 districts across Pakistan. This activity was gradually expanded and it now covers 50 districts in four provinces of Pakistan, AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan.

The gathering paid glowing tributes to Afzal Kohistani, who was murdered yesterday for pursuing the case of girls killed in Kohistan several years ago. Aliya Mirza read a poem on him. In addition, symbol of resistance against oppression, Mukhtaran Mai, renowned human rights activist, Tahira Abdullah, Member Board of Governors and renowned economist Dr. Aliya Khan and Executive Director of Aurat Foundation, Naeem Mirza spoke on the occasion and highlighted achievements and challenges of women. The event was moderated by Mumtaz Mughal and Shabina Ayaz.

On this occasion, the leaders of the alliance presented a resolution before media describing the challenges faced by women

while urging the stakeholders to ensure protection of women's rights at all level. The resolution also explained the vision and objectives of the alliance.

The resolution says that women in Pakistan are still striving for equality of rights and opportunities. Among a number of other obstacles, they face horrifying forms of gender-based violence. Some of these forms of GBV are traditional customs and practices, e.g. Swara, Vanni, Badal-e-Sulah (compensation), 'honour' (i.e. dishonour) killings, gang rapes; sexual harassment in public and private spaces; acid crimes, trafficking, abduction, kidnapping, forced conversion, forced marriage, forced prostitution; bonded labour, early/childhood marriage; high maternal mortality due to lack of reproductive health services; and so on.

"In the sphere of education, we note with concern that, while we see some improvement in steps towards reducing gender disparities in urban areas, we see the reverse in rural areas, where the majority of our

population resides. In employment, the vast majority of rural women still continue to work as unpaid, uncounted and unrecognized agricultural labour, including the livestock, forestry and fisheries sectors. Likewise, we still see gender discrimination in the transport and technology sectors, amongst others," the statement mentioned.

The statement notes with concern that illegal 'Jirgas' and 'Panchayats' still rule de facto in the rural and peri-urban areas, ordering and enforcing the most barbaric forms of GBV despite repeated judgements of the superior judiciary, declaring them to be illegal, cruel, unjust and inhuman, and directing successive governments to eradicate them.

"This raises serious questions about the efficacy of implementation of the pro-women laws and of the law enforcement agencies, and of the writ of the state. There are numerous factors responsible for the above grave situation of women, girls and TGIs in Pakistani society, including, inter alia: patriarchy; misogyny; in-

herently discriminatory outdated societal attitudes, customs, norms and language; lack of education coupled with an inadequate and inappropriate education system; old anti-women laws still remaining on the statute books; absence of the rule of law; women's lack of access to justice due to the expensive and complex judicial system; continuing archaic feudal and tribal systems, with their inherent class inequities and undemocratic structures," says the statement.

The executive council of WAP includes Razia Sultana, President (Rawalpindi); Sha-keela Khan, Senior Vice President (D.G. Khan); Samina Bibi, Vice President (Sibbi); Surya Manzoor, (Gujranwala); Ghazala Anjum, General Secretary (Sukkur); Anna Bibi, Joint Secretary (Jafferabad); Rasheed Aziz, Joint Secretary (Jhelum); Rukhsana Kausar, Information Secretary (Nawabshah); Shaheen Akhtar, Finance Secretary (Nowshera); Amira Liaqat (AJK); Poonam Hamza (Gilgit-Baltistan).