

The gender gap

Obaid Khan

It will take Pakistan 136.5 years to close its gender gap, according to the WEF. Let that sink in. Pakistan has the highest overall hourly average (mean) gender pay gap, at 34 percent, according to the ILO's Global Wage Report 2018-19; this is more than double the global average. Pakistani women account for almost 90 percent of the bottom one percent of wage earners. This list of statistics is endless and countless more facts and figures could be stated to highlight just how marginalised women in Pakistan are.

One might be quick to attribute this to the lack of economic development of the country. Had this been the case, Pakistan, being third worst in the world in gender parity according to the WEF, would also have the third lowest GDP per capita but this is not the case. In fact, the gender gap in Pakistan has worsened with time despite economic growth.

Others may point to the existence of 'pro-women' policies such as the Benazir Income Support Programme and the Prime Minister Youth Loan Schemes and the country's dedication to attempt to address its gender gap. However, the issues faced by women are far too complex and institutionally deep-rooted to be resolved by surface-level policies.

In a country where only 29 percent of women have a bank account and individuals need to either be salaried or business owners to open an independent bank account, the 'pro-women' policies I have mentioned above would be rendered futile.

Covid-19 will further worsen this divide. According to Bina Agarwal's research, households prioritise the wellbeing of sons over that of their daughters in the event of a natural disaster, leading to further neglect of female household members. Moreover, women would be disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment in lockdowns as due to the lack of personal internet devices in the country, men would be given priority in terms of the usage of these shared devices.

Perhaps the biggest issue faced by women in Pakistan are the barriers to educational attainment. Female school enrolment in Pakistan is restricted by the poor quality of toilet facilities in public schools. If women do put up with these often-non-existent facilities at school, overcome their fear of harassment on the way to school and are fortunate enough to be sent to school by their parents, often as children, they are married off and taken out of school. By doing so, society takes away the tools women require to lift themselves up as they remain perennially dependent on others.

After getting married, the lives of women continue to be dictated by others. They often face the threat of divorce or, worse, violence, if they take contraceptives without informing their husbands. This forced lack of family planning results in parents being able to spend less time and resources on the wellbeing of their daughters, given their preference for their sons, perpetuating the gender gap.

According to the ILO, because of social and cultural norms, women in Asia undertake 80 percent of total hours of unpaid work and thus have less time to focus on their needs and wants. This often involves hard, physical labour such as carrying wood and fetching water from a well, all without any remuneration, with a bonus of an upset and ungrateful husband.

It is time Pakistanis ask themselves this: 'why do we hate our women?' In pre-Islamic Arabia, the Age of Ignorance or Jahiliyyah, female infanticide was practised. In Pakistan, 1400 years later, some parents still go to the extent of aborting their daughters due to societal pressure and preference for sons.

Finally, there is the issue of a lack of women's representation at the managerial level. This can partly be attributed to women being penalised for having children by availing maternity leave and there being no mandatory paternity leave policy. This results in women being left behind relative to male counterparts in terms of experience.

This issue is further aggravated by women being coerced to study humanities rather than STEM and thus getting left out of technical and technology-related jobs. Not only are these some of the highest paid jobs, but these disruptive jobs are the cornerstone of paving the way for the future labour market as well as the world. As these jobs will inform tomorrow's policy, without having a say in policy, future generations will face an even greater gender gap.

Pakistan is at a crossroads; it can either choose to address these issues at a micro and macro level or continue to plummet in gender-related rankings by further marginalising 50 percent of its human capital, arguably its biggest asset and resource.

The writer is a researcher at PIDE. He studied MSc Finance and Accounting at Imperial College

London and BSc Economics at SOAS, University of London.