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Statement submitted by The American Pakistan Foundation and Muslim American Leadership Alliance, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The American Pakistan Foundation (APF) welcomes the priority theme of the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Gender equality and empowerment remain a core theme of the work of APF as a non-profit and non-partisan organization committed to building bridges between the United States and Pakistan and to empowering the Pakistani American community in all aspects of American life. Our focus on strengthening policy literacy regarding socio-economic issues in Pakistan cannot be fully realized if we ignore the need to foster women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, and to end gender-based violence in Pakistan. We have had special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2018.

Significant Challenges with Grave Consequences

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan states that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex and ensures the full participation of women in all areas of national life. Yet Pakistan still has a poor track record in protecting women from all kinds of violence. The hostility of public spaces and institutions towards women has shaped the extent to which Pakistani women achieve full and effective participation in public life. We note the following trends as significant challenges:

A culture of toxic masculinity dominates the Pakistani labor force, media, laws, and gender norms, making public spaces largely unsafe for women and girls.

Pervasive lack of action against those who commit crimes against women has relegated women to a second-tier status in the Pakistani legal system, where women are often punished for being victims of sexual assault.

When Pakistani women protest to call attention to their rights, as they did in March 2020 at the Aurat March, they face backlash from conservative groups making death and rape threats.

Social media, as a digital public square, has been used by women to voice their opinions and protest in a safer space than they are accustomed to, but such participation also comes with its own barriers and costs, as Pakistani women face online harassment, blackmail, and abuse.

Women's participation in political and civic engagement remains colored by patriarchal gender norms that limit women's access to running for political office, engaging with political parties, and the simple act of voting.

Participation in the Labor Force

Presently, only 25 per cent of women participate in the formal labor force. Unsafe public and private transportation options for women of most socioeconomic backgrounds means that women do not feel safe outside of their home and less likely to participate in public life or be supported by their families to do so. In 2019, a new law passed by the Sindh provincial government strengthened the rights of female agricultural workers, who often face discrimination in pay and benefits. Gender norms and familial expectations of women performing household duties also prevents participation. Married women are 7 per cent less likely to be in the labor force than unmarried women.

Participation in Political Life

Women's participation in public life at a political level reveals some progress is being made. As of 2020, women hold 20 per cent of seats in the Parliament, which is

10 per cent shy of the government's 30 per cent goal. In 2013, women won 70 out of 342 seats in the lower house of the national legislature, and in the upper house women won 17 out of 100 seats. A slightly higher percentage of women also ran for national office in 2013 compared to 2008. However, this progress is largely reserved for women who hail from elite socioeconomic backgrounds who have access to tools enabling participation in political life: wealth, family connections, and the financial means to feel safer in public than the average Pakistani woman.

Participation in Civic Engagement

Beyond elected office, women can participate in public life by exercising their right to vote. In 2018, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) attempted to increase female voters by providing opportunities for women to receive national identity cards, which gives women an official record in the system. It also established a gender wing to register women in areas of low participation and changed the election law to void any election results in constituencies where female turnout was less than ten per cent. Since 2013, the ECP's work has led to increases in the number of women registered to vote by 24 per cent. But 9 per cent fewer women than men voted in the 2018 general election, with a significant gender gap in the metropolitan areas. We view patriarchal gender norms as a significant explanation for the continued gap in women's participation in public life at a political level. Women are excluded because of prevalent notions that they shouldn't participate in political life; that women possess less knowledge of politics than men; and that men should lead household political mobilization, leading to limited direct contact between women and political parties.

Recommendations

Women's physical mobility and personal safety is central to any progress in their participation and decision-making in public life. The Pakistani government at federal and provincial levels should support civil society and public and private sector interventions aimed towards making public transportation more safe and accessible for women.

Governments and employers should foster a culture of innovative problem solving around the barriers, rather than view them as static conditions. For example, Pakistan has over 150 million mobile phone subscribers. Stakeholders in women's safety should support the development and use of mobile applications that prioritize women's safety in public spaces, the labor force, and civic and political life.

The Pakistani government can boost women's participation in public life by supporting the educational and motivational campaigns of civil society, both in real-time and virtually through social media platforms where women and girls actively participate.

Political parties need to engage directly with women, rather than rely on male members of households as their surrogates. This will require creating more space and opportunities for women within the political party system; female party workers are more likely to gain access to female-only spaces in households as well as in other social and economic spaces where women participate.

We recommend provincial ministries of education increase their focus on skills and training programs customized for women in rural and urban areas, as the lack of proper skills and training serves as an impediment to women's upward mobility in the labor force.