



In today's competitive environment, when technological advantages are short-lived, employees are no longer hired for life, and customers globe-hop and brand-hop for the best deal, it becomes critical for companies to be able to attract and retain the "best and the brightest" talent to generate and execute new ideas and solutions. 50 percent of the best and the brightest are women, and global companies have a special need to attract and retain them as employees because they are also the dominant customers worldwide and want to deal with businesses where women appear to be fairly represented.

Women are undeniably essential part of any nation's journey towards the heights of success and glory and no accomplishment in any walk of life could be achieved without their being side by side with men. It is that integral role of this rather weaker mortal that made visionary like Mohammad Ali Jinnah quoted as "Crime" to put them within the boundaries of their houses as prisoners.

The contemporary world's perception is though more aware of the discrimination against women but the reality is that this relatively lesser gender has remained the object of abuse, prejudice, injustice, bias and more traumatically violence since the dawn of the time. Though western women certainly enjoy much immunities than off course the women of 3rd world and poor countries but nonetheless in general, women have to struggle to get what is their right in order to give their lives a more dignified meaning.

The battle grounds for women are encompassing every aspect of modern and historic societies. Whether it's the question of cultural and moral roles and ranks, or the basic rights to have equal opportunity to get food, education, healthcare and employment, women in general have to make extra efforts to claim what men could get without even given any thought.

Equal enjoyment of human rights by women and men is a universally accepted principle, reaffirmed by the Vienna Declaration, adopted by 171 states at the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993. It has many dimensions:

- Equal access to basic social services, including education and health.
- Equal opportunities for participation in political and economic decision-making.
- Equal reward for equal work.
- Equal protection under the law.
- Elimination of discrimination by gender and violence against women.
- Equal rights of citizens in all areas of life, both public such as the workplace and private such as the home.

According to a complex measure that includes life expectancy, wealth, and education, The Human Development Report 1999 of the United Nations Development Program states that there is no country that treats its women equivalent to its men.

Women in much of the world lack support for fundamental functions of human life. They are less nourished than men, less healthy, more vulnerable to physical violence and sexual abuse. They are much less likely than men to be literate and still less likely to have pre-professional or technical education. When they attempt to enter the workplace, they face greater obstacles, including intimidation from family or spouse, sex discrimination in hiring, and sexual harassment in the workplace – all frequently without effective legal recourse.

Pakistani women are no different than their fellow females all around the world in general. In fact being the citizen of a 3rd world country, they face double the hurdles and difficulties to give themselves a decent life. Women in Pakistan whether belong to upper class or hail from a remote ruler area face dilemmas every day just to survive with dignity in a male dominated society.

To give a picture of Pakistani male attitude over women specially on more cosmopolitan but less empowered women nothing could be more reflective than the famous writer Quratul Ain Haider's terminology 3M i.e. "Male, Muslim and Middle Class". The women living in between of high or low status suffer the most in this country as they can think for themselves more than the other two categories.

The way the principals and guidelines of Islam being high jacked and interpret as per the wishes of male chauvinism in the country that came into being in the name of Islam would be the phenomenon of one of its kind in modern history.

There is still no escape for the women in many parts of the country from this unspoken imprisonment they face, in which all decisions about them and their lives are made by their custodians, who may be their fathers, brothers or their husbands. No one cares to find out what they want in life, or about their ideas or thoughts. Despite this the woman of Pakistan has come a long way in proving herself.

The Human Development Report has consistently defined the basic objective of development as enlarging people's choices. At the heart of this concept are three essential components:

- Equality of opportunity for all people in society.
- Sustainability of such opportunities from one generation to the next.
- Empowerment of people so that they participate in – and benefit from – development processes.

In the light of the above, the condition of women in our country, especially the ones who constitute the rural masses is far from fair or morally and ethically correct. This fact has been highlighted on numerous occasions by the ill treatment of women in rural areas. One often hears of disturbing and tragic incidents in the news.

There are many faces of a woman of Pakistan. In the rural areas of Frontier or the villages of Sindh, she lives with the identity of either the mother of the future feudal lord, wife, daughter or sister of the feudal. There is a vast difference in attitudes of women, and their behavior, in urban and rural areas. She has been fighting the battle of life and society since years, and will keep fighting always.

And whenever we will see her, she will be found thanking her Lord for whatever she has proving the fact that endurance and patience is what a woman possesses most strongly. Women had to defend themselves not only vis-à-vis the state but also against hostile mischief-makers in the society at large. Such attacks still continue. Women have fought back.

These developments must be viewed against the background of quite far-reaching changes in Pakistan's society in the four decades since independence, that have affected women's place in it, both in the rural and the urban society. It is the latter, the urban society, with which we shall be most concerned here, for this is where the changes challenge the most forcefully established social practices and attitudes.

The continuous inflation in the cost of living in Pakistan over the decades has brought about a situation where a man's wage is no longer sufficient to keep the family content. Therefore in the last few decades there was a continuous pressure to broaden the base of the family economy.

Gradually and steadily, more and more women were forced to find jobs to supplement family incomes. The change is visible and quite striking. Initially only a few occupations were thought to be respectable enough for such women. As the pressure for jobs increased the concept of a 'respectable job' was progressively broadened to take in a wider range of jobs.

Youthful women are more aware of their identities, their capabilities and are definitely more ambitious. The inflation and exposure through media has opened minds in the Pakistani society, where parents feel confident that their daughters can also be successful in lives.

Similarly, young men want to choose sanguine women as wives who can be more of a partner than just glorified maids who would cook and look after kids. Time has also come to an extent when women, in some instances, themselves choose to be housewives. And one thing the Pakistani woman will always enjoy is the respect and acceptance of her decision to be a housewife. She can make the choice to work in case of need too.

Education is the key to acceptable and respectable jobs and careers. Lower middle class families would find it degrading to let their women take up jobs as domestic servants or to work on the factory floor i.e. jobs for which education is not a pre-requisite. But families who expect their women to take up jobs as teachers or office clerks (or better) tend therefore to put a higher value on women's education than was the case before – though financing the education of son's still takes precedence.

There was a time when women's education was thought to be mere indulgence; wasteful of the money spent on it. There is demand for women's education also from professional men who want to marry reasonably educated wives, although not too highly qualified.

There is a concept of an 'over-qualified' woman i.e. a woman who has better qualifications than her potential spouse. Such a woman is positively at a disadvantage.

There are, however, many lower middle class households in Pakistan where women have been given no education that could benefit them for 'respectable' salaried jobs. Traditionally they were relegated to the role of 'housewives'.

But, gradually and with increasing rapidity new avenues for exploiting the labor of these women have opened up. There are factories with 'women only' work force, notably in the ready made clothing trade, where they can go and work as seamstresses or similar tailoring and finishing jobs, which are woefully underpaid.

What we need to do is that special attention be paid on selecting the communication channels that are most appropriate for women and on producing materials in local languages. Because women are involved in many aspects of rural life, their traditional knowledge systems are complex and holistic.

Consequently, communication programs must deal with the various economic and social issues affecting women, including agriculture, habitat, health, nutrition, family planning, population growth, the environment and education and illiteracy.

Our women may play a major role in ensuring food security and in the development and stability of the rural areas of our country. Yet with little or no status, they frequently lack the power to secure land rights or to access vital services such as credit, inputs, extension, training and education.

And to give recognition to the role and the tremendous contribution of women to our country's economic development and food security as stipulated in Pakistan, their vital contribution to society goes largely unnoticed.

In Pakistan's economy, women play an active role, but their contribution has been grossly underreported in various censuses and surveys. Consequently, official Labor force statistics show a very minimal participation of women.

Pakistani women play a major contribution in agricultural production, livestock and cottage industries. Women often devote more time to these tasks than men do. They participate in all operations related to crop production such as sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting, as well as in post-harvest operations such as threshing, winnowing, drying, grinding, husking and storage (including making mud bins for storage).

Rural Women in Pakistan carry out these tasks in addition to their normal domestic chores of cooking, taking care of children, elderly and disabled, fetching water and fuel, cleaning and maintaining the house as well as some of its construction.

The status of women in Pakistan is not homogenous because of the interconnection of gender with other forms of exclusion in the society. There is considerable diversity in the status of women across classes, regions, and the rural / urban divide due to uneven socioeconomic development and the impact of tribal, feudal, and capitalist social formations on women's lives.

However, women's situation vis-à-vis men are one of systemic subordination, determined by the forces of patriarchy across classes, regions, and the rural / urban divide.

Gender is one of the organizing principles of Pakistani society. Patriarchal values embedded in local traditions and culture predetermines the social value of gender. An artificial divide between production and reproduction, created by the ideology of sexual division of labor, has placed women in reproductive roles as mothers and wives in the private arena of home and men in a productive role as breadwinners in the public arena.

This has led to a low level of resource investment in women by the family and the state. Thus, low investment in women's human capital, compounded by the ideology of purdah (literally "veiled"), negative social biases, and cultural practices; the concept of honor linked with women's sexuality; restrictions on women's mobility; and the internalization of patriarchy by women themselves, becomes the basis for gender discrimination and disparities in all spheres of life.

The social and cultural context of Pakistani society is predominantly patriarchal. Men and women are conceptually divided into two separate worlds. Home is defined as a woman's legitimate ideological and physical space, while a man dominates the world outside the home. The false ideological demarcation between public and private, inside and outside worlds is maintained through the notion of honor and institution of purdah in Pakistan.

Since the notion of male honor and respect is linked with women's sexual behavior, their sexuality is considered a potential threat to the honor of the family.

Therefore, women's mobility is strictly restricted and controlled through the system of purdah, sex segregation and violence against them. In the given social context, Pakistani women lack social value and status because of negation of their roles as producers and providers in all social roles.

The preference for sons due to their productive role dictates the allocation of household resources in their favor. Male members of the family are given better education and are equipped with skills to compete for resources in the public arena, while female members are imparted domestic skills to be good mothers and wives.

Lack of skills, limited opportunities in the job market and social and cultural restrictions limit women's chances to compete for resources in the public arena. This situation has led to the social and economic dependency of women that becomes the basis for male power over women in all social relationships.

However, the spread of patriarchy is not even. The nature and degree of women's oppression / subordination vary across classes, regions, and the rural / urban divide.

Patriarchal structures are relatively stronger in the rural and tribal setting where local customs establish male authority and power over women's lives. Women are exchanged, sold, and bought in marriages. They are given limited opportunities to create choices for themselves in order to change the realities of their lives.

On the other hand, women belonging to the upper and middle classes have increasingly greater access to education and employment opportunities and can assume greater control over their lives.

The most powerful aspect of social and cultural context is the internalization of patriarchal norms by men and women. In learning to be a woman in the society, women internalize the patriarchal ideology and play an instrumental role in transferring and recreating the gender ideology through the process of socialization of their children. This aspect of women's lives has been largely ignored by the development initiatives in the country.

Despite the improvement in Pakistan's literacy rate since its independence (1947), its overall literacy rate of 45 percent (56.5 percent for males and 32.6 percent for females in 1998) is still behind most of the countries in the region. The literacy rates may have risen generally; however, with the increase in population, the number of illiterate Pakistanis has more than doubled since 1951, while the number of illiterate women has tripled. Approximately 60 percent of the total population is illiterate, and women form 60 percent of the illiterate population.

Strong gender disparities exist in educational attainment between rural and urban areas and among the provinces. In 1996 – 1997 the literacy rate in urban areas was 58.3 percent while in rural areas it was 28.3 percent, and only 12 percent among rural women. There are also considerable inequalities in literacy rates among the four provinces, especially disparities between men and women.

Women in Pakistan participate fully in economic activities in the productive and reproductive sphere. The economic value of women's activities in the reproductive sphere and unpaid work as a family laborer in the productive sphere has not been recognized as productive and is not accounted for in the national statistics.

Change is inevitable. We have seen many changes that have taken place in history and they continue. But the vital question here is: when will this discrimination against the

"weaker sex" end, and when will we truly begin to respect women and treat them fairly and equitably?

Another illusion defeats us. It is that there is some magic in lecturing and in the hearing of recitations. We want as much time for this as possible. We begrudge taking time to work with individual pupils. Yet we know very little about the actual effectiveness of what we do. Is it not at least possible that our classroom work would be greatly increased in effectiveness if only we spent more time with our pupils as individuals?

We seem to be obsessed with teaching. We know that no one can educate another person, that all of us must educate ourselves. The role of women in development of our nation is that of a helper in this process. The question is: How can we best help?

The woman holds the secret of how to receive, feed, shelter, and give birth to life. Woman is the being destined to give life, in opposition to what the world is facing at the end of the 20th Century. Woman is a creature with an inner space to receive and protect life, to make it grow and give it to the world.

The best decisions in order to protect life, to build peace, to change traditions that affect women's dignity, and to seek respect for human rights, but our world needs the presence, participation and co-responsibility of women in decision making.

Human development is a process of expanding choices for all people, not just for one part of society. Such a process becomes unjust and discriminatory if most women are excluded from its benefits. And the continuing exclusion of women from many economic and political opportunities is a continuing indictment of modern progress. For women, it is still an unequal world. This inequality varies from country to country as it does from society to society.

It is true that after centuries of neglect, the past two decades, as part of an integrated approach to human development, have witnessed the demonstration of great awareness and considerable concern for closing the gender gap through building women's capabilities. Despite this, disparity between women and men persists – in their access to education, health and nutrition, in their right to life and property and protection by their societies and legal systems. This determines the pace of progress of a nation and how much women can contribute to and benefit out of this progress.

Pakistan is a developing country, which is striving hard to face the global economy challenges. The role of women is the crucial factor in the development of our country.

We waste our major percentage of population without taking any creative work. The role of women in development of a nation is very vertical. But we continuously ignore this important asset of our nation. A well-educated woman can perform her responsibility more efficiently and effectively. Women must be regarded as agents and beneficiaries of change. Investing in women's capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices

is not only valuable in it but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development.

Now I look forward to that day when we are walking together with all those who are searching for ways of a more humane life, which will give dignity to all the women.

About the Author

Syed Imtiaz Hussain is Head of HR & Administration in one of the leading multinational Company. As a member of top management team; he develops a highly professional A-Class HR environment in the organization by utilizing his vast practical and visionary experience of HRM and HRD.

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