

EDITORIAL

Access to rights

By Ayesha Khan

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AS we in Pakistan confront a seemingly endless series of natural and man-made disasters, we must not forget some on-going developments that will have a dramatically positive impact on women.

One such development is the increasing number of women who have national identity cards, and can thereby use them to access rights and privileges from the state.

According to press reports by June this year, the National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra) had issued 79.13 million ID cards out of an eligible adult population of 89.89 million. Men are almost universally registered, but only 77 per cent of women have been registered.

The good news is that the female registration growth is almost 89 per cent as compared to the last two-year period. Applications from women have grown from 35 per cent to 55 per cent of the total applications. Part of this is increased government and Nadra outreach to facilitate women's applications. Another, very important, part is that women appear to be realising the advantages of possessing NICs. Some of these are discussed here.

Foremost, perhaps, is political participation. In order to vote at the local, provincial or national level, both men and women must possess an ID card. Similarly, candidates must possess an ID card in order to stand for election at any of these levels. In short, a successful democratic political process rests on the participation of an identifiable citizenry.

When women's advocacy groups began to work across the country in the 1980s and 1990s to encourage women's greater participation in political parties, they soon realised that women were sidelined in the whole process of electioneering. Advocacy thus turned to encouraging women to stand for election, and then developed into an all-out campaign to encourage women to vote. Since all of this participation required valid identification cards, women's organisations — led by the Aurat Foundation — soon started programmes to help women get themselves ID cards.

In the 1997 elections, almost half of the eligible voters were women, but the turnout was still six million fewer than men. In the general elections of 2002 a full 54 per cent of registered voters were men, while 46 per cent were women, but the total number of votes actually cast was only about 42 per cent of all registered voters. During the 2008 elections, a similar proportion of eligible voters participated — and there were a number of documented incidents in which women were prevented from casting their vote.

The process of getting women's citizenship registered with an NIC, and thus eligible to vote, has been fraught with social and cultural obstacles. Included among these is the protest in some communities against the mandatory photograph of an individual on the ID card. Similarly, male heads of families and local leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan in particular have also refused to allow women to cast their vote on election day, which in part explains the lower female voter turnout.

However, the number of women eligible to vote and increasingly taking part in elections is rising. With their ID cards in hand, they will be able to make their voices heard more and more in each election. We now need to successfully close the gap between women who do not possess ID cards and women who cast their votes.

Then there is the matter of social protection.

The Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) was launched in 2008 as a measure to offer direct relief to the poor in the form of cash transfer to women. To be eligible for assistance for her family, a woman has to have a computerised NIC. Nadra is now the designated body to handle data entry validation and verification of applicants. Not surprisingly, Nadra is dealing with a rush of application forms. A recent estimate published by the government is that 2.1 million

of these are deemed eligible for the BISP and 50,600 are currently in process. The process of identifying the poorest in districts across Pakistan is painstaking and will take a long time to perfect. Yet the success of the whole endeavour is based on a fundamental principle: that is, the state is responsible for the welfare of its most vulnerable citizens, and once identified these women can stake their claim to social protection measures.

An area where women are perhaps most likely to benefit from being registered is reproductive health. Pregnancy and child-bearing for women in Pakistan unfortunately remains a serious risk to their health and survival. While a great deal of state and donor funding is being spent on improving their health indicators, and those of infants and newborns, there are some innovative ideas under discussion. In at least one of these, success will depend on women possessing an ID card.

At present, the legal age at marriage for girls is 16, while for boys it is 18. Although there is now a growing trend for young people to marry in their early twenties, a full 13 per cent of girls are married by the time they are 15 and 40 per cent by age of 18. This continues despite the fact that early child-bearing, i.e. under the age of 18, increases a girl's chances of maternal death due to insufficient biological development to support reproduction. It also increases the likelihood of babies dying before the age of one.

There is an important initiative under way at the national and Sindh provincial assembly levels to amend existing laws and standardise the age of permissible marriageable age for both sexes as 18. Enforcing such a law would have to require a girl entering into marriage to possess a CNIC and depend upon nikah khawans' cooperation at the time of the marriage contract. Combined with government training of the nikahkhawans and imposing penal sanctions if they do not follow the law, it may work. In Karachi a number of civil society groups are working with the provincial government to maintain a focus on achieving this goal and galvanising the support of politicians. The initiative enjoys cross-party support among elected female representatives.

In the immediate term, CNICs may help to save women and their children from destitution, prevent under-age marriage and child-bearing, and enable them to participate more fully in electoral politics. Now that is really making women count.

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