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Women's Quiet Revolution in Pakistan

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Abstract

The term 'quiet revolution' sounds like an oxymoron since revolutions normally produce a lot of noise. But when something entirely unexpected happens, that too can be called a revolutionary event even if it is not very noisy. That is precisely what is happening to women in Pakistan. A significant number are leaving their homes and entering the work force. The numbers involved are large enough to make a difference not only to the women's overall welfare. This trend will profoundly affect the way Pakistani society functions, the way its economy will run and the manner in which its political order will evolve. The paper suggests that this change is coming about as a result of developments in three areas: Education, employment and entrepreneurship.

Educating the Pakistani Women²

Let us begin with education. There is a widespread belief that women in Pakistan are doing poorly in receiving education. That impression is correct to some extent. The overall rate of literacy for women is low; much less than that for men which is also not very high. Although the

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² This paper draws upon the comments made by the author at a seminar organised by the Pakistan High Commission in Singapore. The seminar was held on 27 June 2012 and dealt with the subject of 'Women in Pakistan's Development'.

Government of Pakistan is a signatory to the declaration that committed nations around the world to the Millennium Development Goals, the MDGs, the country is far from achieving them. Attaining universal literacy for both boys and girls by the year 2015 was one of the MDG mandates. With literacy rates of 70 per cent for boys and only 45 per cent for girls in 2010, Pakistan will miss these goals by a vast margin.

However, in speaking of a revolution, the reference is to the rate of growth in women's enrolments in institutions of higher learning. Here, the recent trends are extraordinary – in fact revolutionary. It is interesting and puzzling that some of the numbers used here to make this point have not appeared in the discourse in the country about economic and social issues. Over the period 1993-2010, the number of girls enrolled for primary education has increased from 3.7 million to 8.3 million. This implies a rate of growth of 4.8 per cent a year, about two times the rate of increase in the number of girls entering the primary school-going cohort. However, even with this impressive rate of increase, it is worrying that girls still account for less than one half – the proportion was 44.3 per cent in 2010 – of the total number of children in school. Much more remains to be done before the goal of universal primary education can be reached.

It is in higher education that girls have made the most spectacular advance. The number of girls attending what is described as 'professional colleges' has increased in the same 17-year period at a rate of 5.6 per cent per annum. In 1993, there were only 100,400 girls attending these institutions. Their number increased to more than 261,000 in 2010. There are now more girls than boys in 'professional colleges'. The proportion of girls in the total population of students in these colleges has increased from 36 per cent to 57 per cent in this period.

It is the attendance in the universities where the real revolution has occurred. There were less than 15,000 girls in these institutions in 1993; their number increased to 436,000 in 2010. The proportion of girls is approaching the 50 per cent mark, with the rate of increase in their numbers at an impressive 20 per cent a year. While a very large number of girls drop out between the primary stage and the stage of professional and university education, the numbers completing higher education now are large. Three quarters of a million girls are now leaving the institutions of higher learning every year.³ A significant number of them are entering the work force.

In education, it is the numbers that make a revolution. Given the rate of increase in the number of girls attending these institutions, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that by 2015, a million girls will be ready every year to enter the modern sectors of the economy. That has already begun to happen and here the statistics on the presence of women in the work force don't tell the complete story. Official statistics still indicate very low levels of women's share in the work force.

³ These numbers are computed from the data in Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Economic Survey, 2009-10 Statistical Annex*, Islamabad, 2010.

According to the official data, only 16 per cent of women were working compared to 50 per cent of men. The rate of women's participation in the work force is higher in the countryside than in the urban areas – 19 per cent as against eight per cent. But these statistics don't paint the real picture. A lot of the work that women do either in the households or in the work place does not get recorded. This is not only the case for developing countries. The same happens in more developed economies that keep a better record of what people do for living. In Pakistan, for instance, women are very actively engaged in the livestock sector but that goes mostly unnoticed in official accounting.

There are a number of sectors in the modern areas of the economy where women now make up a significant part of the workforce. These include the traditional areas where educated women have been active for decades – such as teaching and medicine. However, more recently, as the number of women with high levels of skills increased, they have become players in sectors such as banking, communications, law and politics. They also now make up a significant proportion of the work force in the information technology (IT) companies. Some IT experts have estimated that in their sector there are tens of thousands of women engaged in doing work in what they call 'cottage businesses'. These women with good computer skills are working from their homes undertaking small contractual work for members of their families or their friends who are living and working abroad. Some estimates suggest that more than a billion dollars worth of work gets done in these informal establishments. These are by large one-person shops that receive payments through informal transactions. However, it is the entry of women in the entrepreneurial field where the real revolution is occurring.⁴

To develop this point we will use one example of the development of entrepreneurship among women in Pakistan. This is in the field of education. As already indicated, it is in education that women have made the most spectacular advance. They will achieve higher status in their increasingly conservative society by using the education and higher-level skills they are acquiring. Here, numbers count for more than proportions, but even in terms of proportions, in some areas of education and skill development, women are doing almost as well as men – in some cases even better. This, as noted earlier, is in the enrolment in professional schools and colleges.

What we are seeing is the development of a giant wave that has begun to hit the shores of the Pakistani economy, its society and the political system. With nearly one million women graduating every year from professional colleges and universities, what we are seeing is a change in the composition of the work force and its quality. At the upper levels of the labour market,

⁴ The author is grateful to Netsol Technologies, Pakistan's largest IT firm for providing this information.

there are times when more women than men available to do the needed work and potential employers have to choose from this field.

The change noted above has come about for the reasons that are not unique to Pakistan. It is happening in other parts of South Asia as well. The state was failing to get the public sector to deliver the quality of education demanded by parents belonging to the middle class. As the demand for places within the educational system increased, the state came under growing pressures. More financial and human resources were required to take in all the students knocking at the doors of the system. Most South Asian states did not have the funds in the amounts required, qualified teachers in the numbers needed and textbooks of the quality which parents demanded for the benefit of their children. One conclusion drawn was that the availability of finance to match the needs would reform public education. This turned out to be a wrong assumption to make.

That additional funds alone won't solve the problem was vividly illustrated by the embarrassment caused to the World Bank by the spectacular failure of its large social action programme, or SAP, in Pakistan. This multi-donor, multi-billion-dollar programme was aimed at giving a major lift to the educational sector in the country by increasing the rate of enrolment for both boys and girls, by building new schools in the rural areas so that children didn't have to walk long distances to attend classes, by providing better-trained teachers, and by improving the quality of instruction through better textbooks. The objectives of the programme were good but the cause of its almost total failure was in its implementation.

In the initial stages, the programme concentrated on the province of the Punjab. The education department in Lahore, the provincial capital, had a poor reputation. It was under the influence of the political forces that put pressure on its officials to employ their friends and relatives or to move those who were already working in the system to more desirable places. To use a jargon, the provincial education department was focusing on 'postings and transfers' of teachers as its principal function. An enormous increase in the availability of funds for the system, because of the resources provided by the SAP, led to a sharp rise in the level of corruption, which was already high. The programme, because of these design failures, was eventually abandoned by the World Bank and other members of the donor community.

Women Education-Entrepreneurs

However, failed efforts such as these created an opportunity for women with good education, with access to family funds, and with children of their own to step in and establish institutions of their own which they would themselves manage. Their own children and the children of their

friends and relatives formed their first batch of students. Nasreen ('Mona') Kasuri, from a well-established political and business family, was one of the pioneers in this area, and her performance ranks as an excellent example of the marriage of entrepreneurship to the availability of opportunity.

Some of the more impressive school systems in Pakistan started modestly, with the founding-mother creating a facility which she could monitor as her own children were being taught. Some of these ventures started at the homes of the budding education-entrepreneurs. These modest institutions grew from the pre-school and kindergarten stage to the primary stage to the high school stage. In one case – in the case of the school started by Kasuri – its progress took it to the university stage. The Beaconhouse school system is said to be one of the world's largest, having received an infusion of a significant amount of foreign capital provided by a private equity fund. It has gone beyond Pakistan's borders and established – in some cases, acquired – school systems in Africa, the Far East and Britain. The owners of this for-profit educational system have ploughed back some of their accumulated earnings by giving a large donation for the establishment of a liberal arts university called Beaconhouse National University (BNU). The BNU, specialising in liberal arts, has concentrated on the subjects that attracted women and for which there were growing markets. It is providing instruction in communications, IT, visual arts, architecture and economics.

Conclusion

This one example provides a good illustration of how women's advanced education and acquisition of modern skills have begun to change the social and political landscape. Well-qualified women with the right kinds of skills have decided not to stay at home and just build and nurture their families. They are increasingly becoming professionals and occupying high-level positions. Some economists maintain that supply creates its own demand and that has indeed happened in the case of Pakistan with some significant changes in public policy. For several decades after independence, Pakistan did not admit women into what were called the 'superior services'. These included the Civil Service of Pakistan and the Pakistan Foreign Service. That ban on the recruitment of women was lifted a couple of decades ago, and now women have advanced to the senior most echelons in both services. According to a recent paper written by a woman diplomat, there are now more than a dozen women serving as ambassadors around the globe.

It is, therefore, fair to conclude that even in a country, which is presently in a severe depressed-condition, women's educational and professional performance may offer some cause for hope for a better future. By relegating women for so long to the back benches, Pakistan was operating its

economy with one hand tied to the back. That hand has now been loosened and may contribute to the country's revival.

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