



17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference

Organized by

Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA)
at Islamabad - Pakistan from 22 to 24 October, 2024

Conference Report 2024



The 2024 conference is funded by



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Islamabad



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Promoting Education, Economic Empowerment and Human Rights in Rural Pakistan



17th PODA Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference

17 ویں سالانہ تربیتی کانفرنس برائے دیہی رہنما خواتین

22 to 24 October 2024 Islamabad, Pakistan

Organized by: Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA)

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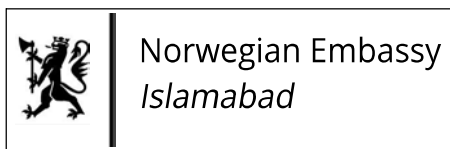
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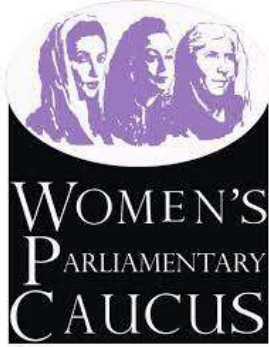
The 17th Annual PODA Rural Women Leadership Training Conference was held at Lok Virsa, Islamabad, Pakistan, from 22-24 October 2024. A total of 2,376 participants attended PODA's 2024 conference over three days, of which 1,939 were women, 436 were men, and 1 was transgender. A total of 18 persons with disabilities (PWDs), including 16 women and 2 men, and 65 persons from minorities (including 50 women and 15 men) were among the diverse participants. A total of 2,289 participants attended during the three days, comprising 1,929 women, 360 men, 3 transgender individuals, 15 Persons With Disabilities (PWDs), and 25 minority representatives from Christian and Hindu communities in Pakistan. The participants came from 130 districts from Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, Sindh, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). The overarching theme of PODA's 2024 conference was based on women leadership training. A vibrant program of interactive technical sessions on the first day of the conference included topics like Empowering Rural Women through Sustainable Agriculture Innovations, Digital Entrepreneurship, and Climate Action: Challenges and Opportunities, tableau on climate change, and question-answer sessions related to it. A strategic session on "Right of the Girl Child" to observe International Girl Child Day and a related session on strategies to stop child marriages were also conducted.

Thematic sessions of the second day included a strategy session on Women's Rights Commitments in Political Party Manifestos: Joint Review for Future Actions by Rural Women and Parliamentarians, and a strategy session on "Legislation for 18 Years as the Minimum Age for Girls in Pakistan - Challenges and Opportunities." The third day of the conference included a special session on Women's Rights to Property and a comprehensive interactive dialogue with rural women and representatives of different organizations during the question/answer sessions across three days of the conference. The opening and closing sessions and women entrepreneurs' display stalls were packed with useful information, sharing of lessons learned, and presentations of innovations, success stories on how to stop child marriages, and forward-looking strategies for women's political participation in upcoming elections in Pakistan.

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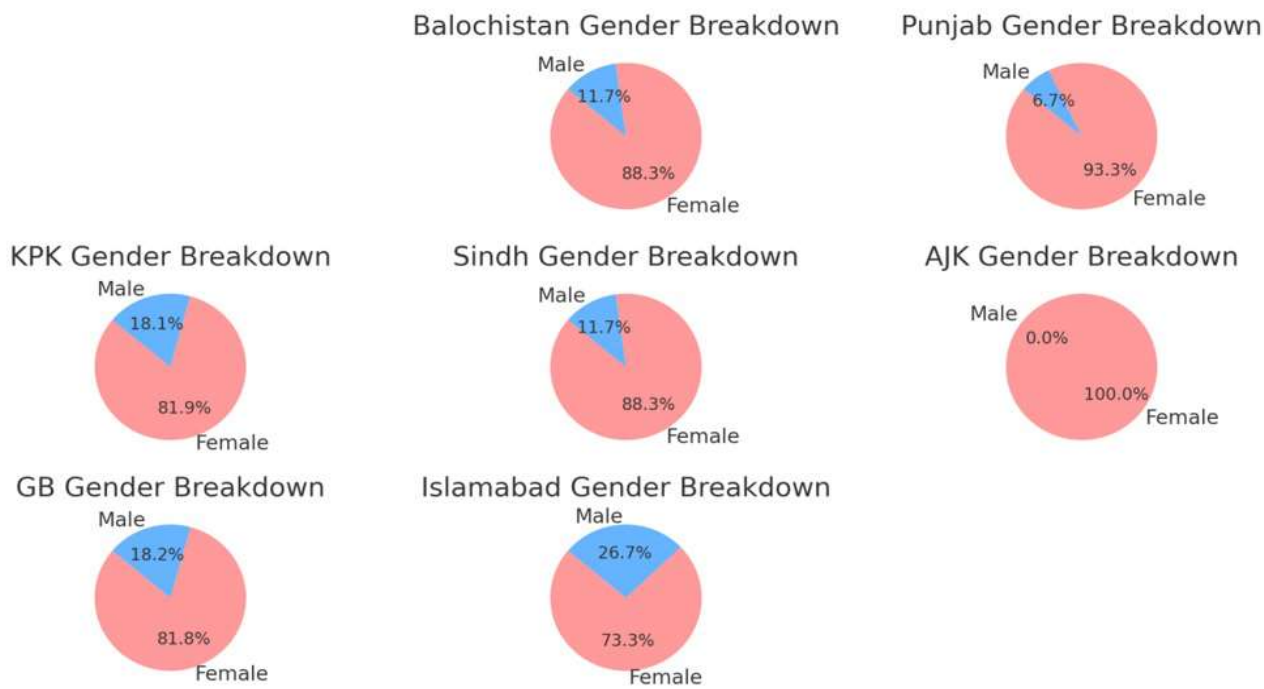
DAY - 1

Tuesday, 22 October, 2024 from 9:00am to 10:30am



OPENING PLENARY

Registration Update (Day 1)



The opening session kicked off at 9.00 am and concluded at 10.30 am. Director Programs PODA Ms. Saleema Munir, opened the session by welcoming everyone enthusiastically and acknowledging each participant for being part of this significant gathering.



She then invited PODA’s Executive Director Ms. Sameena Nazir to formally welcome greet everyone. Ms Sameena Nazir took the stage and greeted each province's delegation in their native welcoming phrases—"Jee Ayan Noon" for Punjabi speakers, "Pakhair Raghly" for Pashto speakers, and more. Her thoughtful words made each group feel seen and celebrated, sparking a wave of smiles across the hall.



As each delegation entered, they showcased the beauty of their heritage, dressed in vibrant traditional attire and holding banners proudly representing their provinces. Punjab led the procession, followed by delegations from Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The hall echoed with applause as Ms Sameena Nazir encouraged everyone to clap for one another. It felt like a festival of unity—each province distinct, yet part of a powerful collective.

She also called Ms. Dilshad Bano, Minister for Women Development from Gilgit-Baltistan to come to the stage and preside the ceremony proceedings. She honored her presence and welcomed her on behalf of the participants.



The participants across hall then stood together as the national anthem played, with voices rising in unison, creating a moment of national pride and shared purpose. Ms Saleema expressed her gratitude not only to those present but also to the many watching through the live stream, emphasizing the conference's impact and reach.



Ms Sameena Nazir then returned to the podium with an engaging activity. She invited women to call out the names of their districts, creating a lively, connected atmosphere. With participants from over 100 districts, the room buzzed with voices from all across the country, each representing a unique story, a different journey, and the same drive for progress. This was more than a conference; it was a tapestry of Pakistan's rural women standing together in strength, resilience, and solidarity.

The PODA conference commenced with a warm acknowledgment of diverse attendees from various regions, with Ms Sameena Nazir introducing distinguished organizations and embassies, including the EU, Norway Embassy, CABI (making its first appearance), Care International, SPO, NCA, SPARC, the Legal Aid Society, Awaz, NED, UN Women, and several government bodies, such as the Government of Gilgit-

Baltistan, Education Minister of Balochistan who will be attending. She said prominent personalities like Sindh’s Women Minister, Rukhshanda Naz from KP, and your leaders from all areas will come. She then welcomed Muzaffar Ali Burki, the Executive Director of Lok Virsa. Ms Sameena Nazir asked the women to familiarize themselves with the conference program.

Ms Saleema extended special thanks to Mr. Muzaffar Ali Burki, and invited Misbah Nazir, the conference manager, and Hamza Bashir, the conference coordinator to the stage. Misbah Nazir welcomed attendees, acknowledging their beautiful cultural attire and cooperation with PODA on registration, appreciating the efforts of focal persons in organizing the event. She highlighted PODA’s success in uniting rural women to collaboratively seek solutions for the challenges faced by rural women.



Ms Misbah introduced the conference theme, “Reducing Early Marriages for Climate Economy and Population Balance in Pakistan,” explaining how early marriages impact society and briefly outlined the event’s sessions. After her introduction, Hamza Bashir welcomed all rural women leaders and emphasized the practical information provided in the bags distributed, which included the agenda and emergency contacts, before highlighting the beneficial nature of the technical sessions to follow.

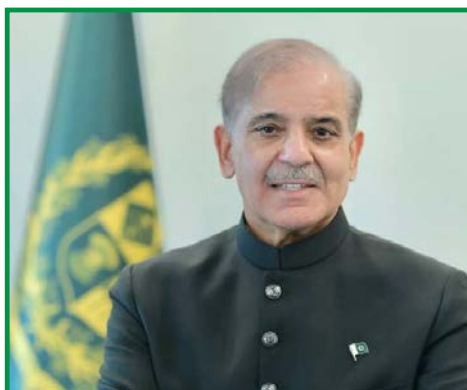
Ms Saleema then invited Muzaffar Ali Burki to say a few words about the conference. He expressed his admiration for the cultural diversity represented, emphasizing that the conference’s inclusiveness of women from every corner of Pakistan would bring impactful changes back to their regions.



Ms. Saleema introduced GB Minister Ms. Dilshad Bano, an advocate for gender equality, who expressed deep appreciation for PODA’s efforts in bringing women from all districts together. In her address, Ms. Dilshad Bano recounted her journey and emphasized the value of rural development and support programs, such as the Agha Khan Rural Support Program, which has been instrumental in helping Gilgit-Baltistan women overcome societal constraints. She emphasized greater engagement of INGO in the region, which has been largely neglected. She said the events like this rural women conference are an opportunity of meeting and networking between the women of GB, KP, Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh to meet, network and share experiences to learn from each other’s experiences.

Later, Ms. Saleema informed the audience that their bags contained a conference booklet with solidarity messages, including words of support from notable figures such as Shahida Rehmani, Secretary of the Women Parliamentarians Caucus; Ms. Dilshad Bano; Raheela Hameed Durrani, Balochistan’s Education Minister; and above all she said the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif has also

sent a message for our conference. She said she would not read all the messages except the one from Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif for you all. She then read the message aloud:



Message of Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif for the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference by Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA)

On the observance of United Nations declared International Day of Rural Women on 15 October, I congratulate Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA) for organizing its 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference in Islamabad. I commend all the participants and partners of this important annual gathering to highlight rural women's progress.

Rural Women play a crucial role in ensuring food security, maintaining agricultural sustainability, protecting environment and contributing significantly to health and education sectors in Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan appreciates the contributions of our rural women towards sustainable development of Pakistan. We understand the challenges that rural women face and therefore our government is making extra efforts to reach out to rural women to provide them better services in all walks of life. I reiterate the government's commitment to uplift the rural women of Pakistan to ensure that they are facilitated in all walks of life that are able to access and enjoy all their rights as citizen of Pakistan.

Pakistan is fortunate to have great women leaders including Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, Mohtarma Kulsum Nawaz, Begum Nasim Wali Khan, Asma Jahangir and others who have shown tremendous courage and exemplary leadership during the most difficult times in the history of Pakistan to ensure women's right to vote and participate in politics as equal citizens. Our party is proud of Mohtarma Maryam Nawaz Sharif as the first ever woman Chief Minister of the Punjab province and her initiatives for women rights.

I once again underscore the commitment of the Government of Pakistan to provide an enabling environment to all the women and girls of Pakistan especially in rural areas to have access to quality education and health services along with vocational and professional training and sustainable livelihoods for a successful life.

I wish the organizers and the delegates a successful conference.

Pakistan Paindabad!

Ms. Saleema after reading out the message invited Ms. Saman Rai, Director-General of Population Welfare Punjab, to the podium. Ms Rai greeted the women marveling at the rare sight of nationwide representation under one roof. She shared her admiration for the tireless commitment of women to their families and communities through every stage of life, often at the expense of their own well-being. Ms. Rai encouraged them to prioritize their health and self-care, as girls who later uplift their families as mothers. Ms Saman emphasized that personal health contributes to family health. She also congratulated the organizing team and acknowledged the women showcasing their cultures through traditional attire, noting that people continue to embrace and celebrate their heritage. The session set a heartfelt tone, celebrating unity, resilience, and collective empowerment.



Next, Rani Shameem, co-host with Ms, Saleema, introduced the focal persons from each province. She began with Bushra Tabassum from Azad Jammu and Kashmir, followed by Shazia Hameed from District Hub, Balochistan. Shaheen Akhtar from District Ghanche, Gilgit-Baltistan, Sakina Afridi from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, representing the Women Welfare Organization, Talat Zahid, Suraj Welfare Foundation Sialkot, and Mohtarma Khanzadi from Sindh were invited to the stage. Rani warmly welcomed them with a song as they greeted and introduced women from their respective regions.

First, Bushra Tabassum from Azad Jammu and Kashmir passionately shared her journey as a PWD, and expressed gratitude to Ms Sameena Nazir for nurturing her abilities from the beginning. Then, Shazia from Hub Balochistan highlighted that Balochistan has an 18% female literacy rate, with the provincial government allocating only 17% of its budget to education. She also noted that 80% of school-aged girls are not enrolled in school, the maternal mortality rate is the highest in Pakistan, and six out of ten women marry young due to inadequate legal protection. Mohtarma Khanzadi from Sindh then addressed the audience in both Urdu and Sindhi, representing Tharparkar. She spoke about the area's water scarcity, limited girls' education, and lack of girls' access to schools and early marriages in Thar. She mentioned that despite laws against early marriage, 80% of young girls in her district still marry early due to poor law enforcement.



Following this, a shield was presented to Muzaffar Ali Burki.

A special shield was presented to Ms. Dilshad Bano, Minister of Women Development from Gilgit-Baltistan, honoring her commitment to the cause. Following this, representatives from Punjab, including Talat Zahid, Ayesha Zafar from Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Said Gul Kalash from Kalash Valley Chitral, took to the stage, and welcomed women from their regions.

To conclude, Rani Shameem announced that the next session would be hosted by Ms Fauzia, formally passing the podium to her.



DAY - 1

Tuesday, 22 October, 2024 from 10:45am to 1:00pm



“Empowering Rural Women through Sustainable Agriculture Innovations, Digital Entrepreneurship & Climate Action: Challenges and Opportunities”

پائیدار زراعت، ڈیجیٹل کاروبار اور موسمیاتی تبدیلی کے حوالے سے دیہی خواتین کو بااختیار بنانے کے حوالے سے مسائل اور مواقع



“Empowering Rural Women through Sustainable Agriculture Innovations, Digital Entrepreneurship & Climate Action: Challenges and Opportunities”

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Ms. Sameena Nazir, Executive Director PODA welcomed the rural women participants who traveled from far-off areas of Pakistan to attend the conference. She also thanked the session co-sponsors, CABI, CARE International, SPO-NCA, UN Women, and Agha Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) -- Canada Global Affairs for extending financial support to the important discussion. She said the recommendations of the session will help towards implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) like No Poverty (1), Zero Hunger(2), Gender Equality(5), Climate Action(13), and Life on Land(15). She then left the podium for Dr. Fozia Kanwal, Agronomist, working on Climate Smart Agriculture and Agri-Business program with women farmers, to moderate the session. Ms. Maryam Fatima, Climate Change Education Officer, PODA-Pakistan was the facilitator for the session.



Dr. Fozia Kanwal introduced the topic of the session and explained how women are intricately linked, both directly and indirectly, to climate change. Explaining the context, she said rural women in Pakistan make up about 60% of the agricultural workforce and they are directly facing the pressing challenges of climate change, consequently, facing significant vulnerabilities. Despite their crucial role in food production, they often lack access to essential resources, technical bio-sciences information, and decision-making opportunities. Rural women also experience gaps in digital literacy that limits their entrepreneurial potential. By integrating climate-resilient practices and women empowerment through knowledge and technology, we can foster community resilience and confidence among women farmers. This session is meant to explore and identify actionable opportunities for women empowerment and link them to the abovementioned SDGs. The session had three parts: first was the technical presentation by Center for Agriculture and Bio-Sciences International (CABI), general discussion on understanding the challenges of rural women in agriculture, entrepreneurship, and climate action, and finally the recommendations from conference participants as forward-looking solution strategies.

Dr. Fozia Kanwal first invited Ms. Sajila Khan, Gender Coordinator from CABI International to give the technical presentation. Ms. Sajila Khan talked about Gender Inclusivity in Agriculture Extension Services and highlighted CABI's work in supporting rural women farmers. Following her insightful presentation, Ms. Sajila Khan shared CABI's commitment to gender inclusivity in agriculture and said that CABI not only provides essential resources to women farmers, it also works to empower them by fostering their

leadership skills. She said these women are encouraged to take on roles as community leaders and agricultural advocates through targeted training programs, thus creating a ripple effect in their communities. She highlighted that CABI's initiatives include partnerships with local organizations to develop tailored content for specific women needs and challenges. By establishing networks, women can share their experiences and knowledge, further strengthening their presence in the agricultural sector.

She stressed the importance of changing societal perceptions about women's contributions to agriculture, advocated for recognition of their work and the need for policies supporting gender equality. CABI's holistic approach not only enhances agricultural productivity but also empowers women to claim their rightful place within the workforce, ensuring that their vital contributions are recognized and celebrated.



Ms. Sajila Khan informed the audience that CABI has established several Plant Clinics across Pakistan to support farmers. She mentioned that one such clinic is set up here at the conference, where participants can meet with plant doctors to discuss any plant-related issues. She encouraged everyone to visit the clinic and take advantage of the opportunity to gain valuable insights into their agricultural practices.

Ms. Sabeen Almas from Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) talked about Empowering Young Women through Skill Development and Digital Literacy. She highlighted the critical connection between SPARC's initiatives and the conference's theme of empowering rural women through sustainable agriculture innovations, digital entrepreneurship, and climate action. She noted that by equipping young women with digital skills, SPARC not only fosters economic independence but also prepares them to engage in sustainable agricultural practices.



She discussed SPARC's Young Women Empowerment Program under which they have so far trained 30,000 young women, empowering them to start small businesses and generate income. Many of these women, despite lacking formal education, now run businesses, showcasing high aspirations and self-reliance.

SPARC's program offers skill development and vocational training, emphasizing digital literacy to equip participants with online business opportunities. The organization also provides platforms for young women to showcase their work, with participants presenting their creations at various events. She shared success stories of women who, through training and online engagement, have achieved economic independence. By showcasing their work at the display stalls in the conference, these young women exemplify the potential of combining digital entrepreneurship with sustainable practices, inspiring others to explore similar pathways and harness opportunities for growth and women empowerment.

Mr. Saleem Chang, Prof. Sindh Agriculture University, Sub-campus Umerkot/SCAN shared the significance of community engagement in achieving sustainable agricultural practices. He linked the university's efforts, in partnership with SPO, to the broader theme of empowering rural women through innovative approaches, illustrating how localized education can lead to tangible economic benefits. He noted that to date, they have observed around 1,200 kitchen gardens, with 30% of the participating women now earning between PKR 2,000-3,000 per day.



He highlighted the importance of using familiar language and culturally relevant methods to make education accessible and impactful. He encouraged participants to recognize the value of sustainable practices and support the educational programs that resonate with local communities. Empowering women is crucial for building resilient communities that can adapt to climate change challenges.

Furthermore, he called for collaboration between educational institutions, NGOs like PODA, SPO, and local governments to amplify these initiatives, ensuring that more women can benefit from such programs. Together, these efforts can pave the way for a more sustainable and prosperous future in agriculture.



Dr. Naeem Aslam, Country Coordinator for CABI, introduced the organization, which has a century-long history and currently operates in 76 countries. CABI actively partners with the Pakistan Agriculture Research Council (PARC) to support farmers. Established in Pakistan in 1950, CABI provides agricultural services nationwide, including advisory centers specifically for women in addition to over 1,000 plant clinics involving women workers at districts.

The organization's primary mission is to assist small-scale farmers in managing agricultural challenges, such as pest control and crop protection. To support this, CABI has developed the "Plantwise Knowledge Bank," a digital tool that provides agricultural literacy and includes resources like a plant toolkit. They also offer the "Crop Sprayer" app on the Play Store and the "CABI Academy" for specialized training courses.

Dr. Naeem highlighted some of several key outcomes of CABI's initiatives:

Outcome 1: Pest Preparedness which encompasses development and integration of pest prioritization processes into national and regional systems and implementation of pest prevention and management plans for priority pests at national levels.

Outcome 2: Pesticide Risk Reduction which covers identification of opportunities for pesticide risk reduction, with implemented solutions, development and implementation of classical biocontrol solutions for priority pests, and adaptation and production of augmentative biocontrol and bio-pesticide solutions for use against priority pests.

Outcome 3: Farmer Advisory Services covered development of digital decision support tools and learning products for agricultural service providers, and implementation of the plant e-clinic approach to enhance the advisory services.



Dr. Naem shared CABI's vision to empower both women and men farmers with small landholdings to manage evolving plant health threats, increase their incomes, improve food security and safety, and reduce biodiversity loss through sustainable practices.

He emphasized the organization's approach to support countries in predicting, preventing, and preparing for plant health threats amidst a changing climate. This empowers farmers to reduce crop losses and produce safer food while safeguarding human health and the environment.

CABI's PlantwisePlus 2030 Goal aims to reach 75 million farmers with small holdings, enabling them to produce more food through safer and sustainable practices, thereby improving food security and rural livelihoods. Dr. Naem introduced the PlantwisePlus Toolkit, which consolidates CABI's tried-and-true digital tools into an easy-to-use platform, including:

- Digital Learning Courses
- Plant Health Information
- Crop Protection Support
- PlantwisePlus Knowledge Bank
- Plantwise Factsheet Library
- CABI BioProtection Portal

- Crop Sprayer App
- Pest Diagnostic Simulator

Through these initiatives, CABI is committed to enhancing the capabilities of farmers, fostering resilience in agriculture, and ultimately contributing to sustainable development goals in the region.

Ms. Zainab Qaiser Khan, Head of Sub-office for Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Climate Change Focal Person at the UN Women Pakistan Office, shared insights on enhancing economic recognition for women in agriculture. She emphasized the crucial role that women play in economic development, particularly in the agricultural sector, despite their significant lack of recognition.



She discussed UN Women's collaboration with organizations like PODA to support women's economic growth by addressing demand-side needs and ensuring that women's contributions are acknowledged. She recognized that many women work as farmers and encouraged them to support one another, advocating for each other's rights and well-being.

Ms. Zainab highlighted the importance of building networks among women in agriculture, fostering solidarity, and sharing resources and knowledge. She urged participants to actively engage in initiatives promoting women's economic empowerment, emphasizing that collective action can lead to lasting change in the agricultural landscape. By advocating for their rights and well-being, women can enhance their visibility and impact, contributing to broader economic development and sustainability in their communities.



Ms. Aqeela Naz, President, Peasant Women Society, Khanewal passionately discussed the challenges faced by female farmers, highlighting the lack of recognition of their significant contributions. She highlighted that these women are often excluded from census records and are not acknowledged in CNICs as farmers, despite their crucial role in the agriculture and the economy. Aqeela called for official recognition of female farmers in both the census and the CNICs to validate their economic contributions.

She expressed concerns over the impact of government policies on farmers, particularly amidst rising input costs. For example, she noted that urea prices have spiked from 9,000 to 12,000 PKR, while wheat is sold for only 4,500 PKR. This financial crunch has made it difficult for farmers to cover electricity bills, leading to legal actions against them.

Ms. Aqeela urged policymakers to reconsider these policies, stressing if the female farmers receive land, resources, and better support, they can significantly contribute to achieving sustainable development goals by 2030. She underscored the need for affordable education to empower the next generation of rural women, ensuring that they have the tools and knowledge to thrive in the agricultural sector.

Dr. Roshanzada, Scientist and IPM Expert at NARC, was one of the technical experts with the CABI team for this session. He gave a comprehensive presentation about the safe use of pesticides and the associated dangers. He noted that the term "pesticide" can be misleading as it implies toxicity and harm he suggested use of the term "Zarai Zehren" instead to emphasize their hazardous nature and raise awareness about their potential risks.

He highlighted the serious dangers posed by improper disposal of pesticides containers, while mentioning the alarming likelihood of children accidentally drinking the leftover liquids. Additionally, he pointed out that accidental skin contact with the liquids can lead to absorption of harmful toxins.



Dr. Roshanzada stressed the importance of implementing safety measures, particularly by female farmers who are often disproportionately affected by pesticides exposure. Through an engaging activity featuring images, he demonstrated essential safety practices for handling pesticides, aimed at raising awareness and encouraging proper protective measures among farmers to ensure their health and safety while managing agricultural tasks.

Ms. Farah Naz, Parliamentary Secretary, Member of National Assembly discussed the significant impact of climate vulnerability on women and emphasized that they can be powerful agents in addressing these challenges. She shared her experience from a recent SEO conference, where a carnival highlighted the work of young women from across Pakistan, noting a particularly high participation rate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Ms. Farah Naz expressed her commitment to work with PODA in taking forward the women's empowerment initiatives. She reinforced the message that empowering women is crucial for effectively tackling climate vulnerability and fostering sustainable development in their communities.



Furthermore, she called for collaborative efforts of government, NGOs, and local communities to create supportive frameworks enabling women to lead the climate action. By equipping women with the necessary skills and resources, we can harness their potential to drive positive change and resilience in the face of climate challenges. Ms. Farah concluded by urging all stakeholders to prioritize women's voices and leadership in climate-related discussions and decision-making processes.



Ms. Fatima Halepoto, Programme Officer, Strengthening Participatory Organizations (SPO) Sindh shared insights into SPO's impactful work in training over 2,000 women in kitchen gardening and various skill-building activities. She emphasized that such empowerment enables women to become more active contributors in their communities, enhancing both their economic independence and social standing. Through partnerships with local women's legal societies, SPO connects women with essential resources and support networks, helping them navigate through challenges and access their rights. Ms. Fatima highlighted inspiring success stories, such as Ms. Resham, who now earns PKR 30,000 a month through her kitchen garden, and Ms. Sapna Bai, a courageous Hindu woman who sought separation to escape domestic abuse, showcasing the transformative power of empowerment.



She stressed that women are essential across all sectors be it education, agriculture, or decision-making and their contributions are invaluable. Ms, Fatima called for continued investment in women's empowerment initiatives, asserting that when women thrive, entire communities benefit. She urged stakeholders to recognize and amplify women's voices, ensuring they are included in all aspects of development and decision-making processes.



Ms. Zaibun Nisa, a member of the Women Self Help Group and FACE from Umerkot District in Tharparkar, shared her insightful experiences on stage. She explained that Umerkot is a unique region where some people are engaged in farming, while others are reliant on rain to cultivate their crops.

She highlighted the distinct challenges faced by women in Tharparkar compared to those in urban areas, noting that rural women often have to find innovative solutions to their problems. Ms. Zaib is actively working with a group called SPO Faiz, which has established further 38 groups in Tharparkar to address a variety of issues affecting women. These challenges include obtaining National Identity Cards (CNICs), preventing early marriages, promoting education, and tackling the impacts of climate change.

Through these groups, women come together to support each other, sharing resources and knowledge to overcome the challenges they face in their daily lives. She emphasized the importance of collective action, stating that unity among women is key to driving change and improving their circumstances. She called for continued efforts to empower women in her community, ensuring they have the tools and support needed to thrive despite the obstacles they encounter.

Ms. Pamela Bhatti from Faisalabad, addressed the issue of climate change. She shared her collaboration with the British Council on this important issue. Ms. Pamela began by noting that while everyone is aware of the causes and effects of climate change, it's essential to recognize that women and children are often the most



affected. To help combat these challenges, her team is conducting various training sessions and awareness programs about climate change. She encouraged everyone to plant more trees to improve the environment and create healthier living conditions. Noting that women typically use more water than men for household tasks, she emphasized the importance of water conservation and urged the audience to be mindful of their usage to avoid waste.

Ms. Pamela also reminded attendees not to throw trash outside their homes and to keep their surroundings clean, just as they would their own homes.

Additionally, she highlighted that many women possess skills in making beautiful handicrafts but often lack the knowledge to market them effectively. To address this, she encouraged them to enroll in digital literacy courses, allowing them to learn how to sell their crafts online and achieve greater independence.

Overall, her message focused on taking care of the environment, conserving resources, and empowering women through education and skill development, underscoring the importance of collective action in driving positive change.

Dr. Ghulam Ali, Chairman of Pakistan Agriculture Research Council (PARC) provided an overview of PARC, the national organization dedicated to agricultural research in Pakistan, which operates across the country with 47 research institutes focused on high-value crops in various regions, including the northern areas. He highlighted the establishment of a research institute in Tharparkar, aimed at transforming the sandy land into productive agricultural zones.



He said PARC offers comprehensive training programs specifically designed to help women start their own agricultural businesses. These sessions are conducted by women from PARC, recognizing the significant contributions and hard work of women in agriculture, from harvesting crops to producing final products.

He underscored the potential for women to thrive in agriculture by learning about seed production, explaining that one crossbred seed can yield hundreds of seeds. Additionally, he encouraged women to explore tissue culture techniques, which can be done at home, providing a pathway for them to achieve independence. In response, Dr. Fozia from PODA said she would plan a women delegation's visit to PARC and NARC for orientation and valuable training programs.

Overall he focused on empowering women in agriculture through education and training, calling it crucial not only for their personal development but also for enhancing food security and economic resilience in Pakistan. By linking women's empowerment with agricultural innovation, PARC aims to contribute to sustainable development goals and foster a more inclusive agricultural sector, where women play a vital role in shaping the future of farming in the country.

Ms. Aamna Munawar Awan, President Center Of Pakistan and International Relations (COPAIR) explained that her organization focuses on initiatives led by women. As the last speaker of the session emphasized that empowering women is essential for the progress of the country. She shared several key points on achieving the goal of women empowerment as given below:



1. **Participation in Policy-Making:** Women should be involved in decision-making processes at all levels, from local to national. This means they should have a voice in shaping policies that affect their lives.
2. **Stakeholder Inclusion:** Women must be recognized as key stakeholders in various sectors, ensuring their perspectives and needs are addressed.
3. **Awareness of Climate Change:** It is crucial to raise awareness about climate change in all local languages across Pakistan. This will help ensure that everyone understands the message clearly and can take action.

Ms. Aamna stressed the importance of working together to empower women. She mentioned that they have enrolled about 10,000 students in various programs focused on digital literacy, climate change, and agricultural business. These programs are free of charge, and nearly 1,000 students have already graduated. Some of these graduates have found jobs, while others have started their agricultural businesses.

Additionally, she highlighted their collaboration with the Chambers of Commerce, where they have established agriculture committees within the women's chambers of commerce. These committees will not only assist women in developing their agricultural businesses but will also provide guidance and support.

Questions/answers and recommendation session:

Ms. Munazza Bukhari, an advocate from Pakpattan, shared her concerns about how the government creates policies but often fails to implement them effectively. She quoted the example of "Suthra Punjab and Roshan Punjab" projects in Pakistan, which are aimed at addressing climate change.



In these projects, the government assigned extra responsibilities to local union councils (UCs) to help with implementation. She highlighted that these councils often did not do the needful. Instead, they just took pictures of their activities and sent them to the authorities, without any real progress on ground.

She recommended that the government should hand over these responsibilities to local governments for better implementation of policies. By doing so, the local governments would be more accountable and could take effective action to ensure that projects are carried out as intended. Overall, her message

emphasized the need for better accountability and real action to make government policies work effectively.



Ms. Sajeeda Parveen from Kemari, Karachi, shared that she runs a small vocational center that includes a climate hub. In this hub, women come together to learn various skills, such as kitchen gardening and recycling.

She asked Dr. Ghulam Ali how they can receive technical support from PARC in Karachi to enhance the training and resources available at her center so that women can gain more knowledge and skills related to agriculture and climate practices. Dr. Ghulam Ali responded that there is an agriculture center at the University of Karachi. He also mentioned that they hold various technical sessions in places like Umerkot and Thatta, where female experts teach skills such as mushroom cultivation and seed production through tissue culture.

He assured Ms. Sajeeda that they offer these training sessions free of charge. He encouraged her to visit their center to learn these techniques, which could help enhance her skills and benefit the women at her vocational center. Overall, he emphasized the importance of gaining knowledge and practical skills to support their work in agriculture and climate initiatives.

Ms. Farheen Mughal, a former MPA, asked Mr. Chang why there is often a lack of practical experience after students finish their education, and why the quality of learning seems low. Mr. Saleem Chang called her question important and explained that many students attend university mainly to earn a degree. After that, they often rely on political connections to find jobs.



Regarding the quality of education, he mentioned that professors work hard to educate their students. However, he added that it is also the responsibility of parents to evaluate and support their children’s education to ensure they receive the best and quality learning.



Ms. Rani Waheeda from Kot Addu suggested that people should wash their vegetables and fruits with brine solution before eating them. She also encouraged everyone to try growing fruits and vegetables at home.

Ms. Asma from Balochistan asked Dr. Aamna Munawar to provide digital literacy training for women in her province, she also highlighted the need for educational opportunities in her region.

Lastly, Ms. Talat Zahid called for ending the practice of cutting down forests for housing projects and promoting forestry instead to help protect the environment and preserve natural

resources. A group of students from the Zameer Akhtar Primary School, Nara Mughlan, Chakwal performed tableau to create awareness about saving the environment and the ozone layer.

Ms. Romina Khurshid Alam, Coordinator to Prime Minister on Climate Change and Environmental Coordination in her address said that in any society where sustainable development is paramount, the pivotal role of rural women in agriculture and community development cannot be overlooked. She said women form a significant portion of the agricultural workforce in the country performing key agricultural activities like planting, harvesting and managing livestock, ensuring that families and communities have access to adequate food and health.



She further said that beyond farming, rural women are crucial for economic diversification. Many engage in small-scale enterprises, from food processing to handicrafts, creating jobs and boosting local economies. Their entrepreneurial spirit can drive innovation and resilience in rural areas, laying the groundwork for sustainable economic growth.

Highlighting women’s immense role in climate resilience building and environmental sustainability in the country, Ms. Romina said as stewards of the land, rural women are crucial for promoting environmental sustainability and boosting as well as sustaining climate resilience activities in different socio-economic areas, particularly agriculture, water management and low-carbon energy development.

“Supporting their community and rural development and natural resource management efforts, however, can further lead to more sustainable agricultural practices, sustainable water management and rural poverty alleviation at all level that benefit both people and the planet together,” she suggested.

Calling for action for women empowerment goals, she said, “As we strive for a more equitable and environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient future for us and our next generations, it is imperative to recognize and support the invaluable contributions of rural women.

Ms. Romina Khurshid also urged stakeholders, policymakers and communities to recognize rural women as key socio-economic stakeholders and key catalysts for development and enhance investment in the empowerment of the rural women. By doing so, we can foster inclusive development that uplifts families, strengthens communities, and ensures a sustainable future for generations to come, she concluded.

After the session concluded, Ms. Romina Khurshid handed out shields to the technical experts as a way to recognize and appreciate their contributions. Following that, Ms. Sameena Nazir, the Executive Director of PODA, presented a shield to Ms. Romina Khurshid as a token of appreciation and a memorable gesture for her participation in the conference. This exchange symbolized gratitude and respect for the efforts made by everyone involved in the event.

In the end, Ms. Farah Naz, Parliamentary Secretary, Member of National Assembly officially inaugurated the stalls display at the 17th Annual Rural Women Conference organized by PODA. As she walked around, Ms. Farah Naz praised the women for their hard work and creativity. She encouraged them by recognizing the challenges they face in running their businesses. Her kind words motivated the stall owners and made them feel valued.





DAY - 1

Tuesday, 22 October, 2024 from 2:00pm to 5:00pm



Strategy Session 2

Rights of the Girl Child

بچیوں کے حقوق



Norwegian Embassy
Islamabad



WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL
LEAGUE FOR PEACE & FREEDOM
WILPF | PAKISTAN

Rights of the Girl Child

بچیوں کے حقوق

An important after-lunch and last session on the first day of the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference was on "Rights of the Girl Child" from 2:00 to 5:00 pm. It was organized by PODA and funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Islamabad.

Executive Director PODA Ms Sameena Nazir moderated the session. She highlighted the legal documentation and computerized national identity cards (CNICs) as a vital right of girls. She introduced the prominent guests and speakers at the session and also thanked them for taking out time for the conference from their pressing engagements. She particularly mentioned the presence of women legislators and ministers from Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan despite their busy schedule as the provincial assemblies were in session and said their presence highlights their commitment to the cause of girls' education and women's rights.



The speakers included Professor Dr Samiya Anwar from Archaeology Dept. University of Chakwal as a representative of Vice Chancellor Dr M Bilal Khan, Ms Said Gul of Kalash Tribe from Chitral, Member Punjab Assembly, Parliamentary Secretary Environment Protection and Climate Change and member Women Protection Authority Punjab Ms. Kanwal Pervaiz Advocate, Member Punjab Assembly and Chief Minister's Focal Person on Polio Eradication Ms Uzma Kardar, Founding Director Bonded Labor Federation of Pakistan Ms Ghulam Fatima, Minister for Education Balochistan Ms Rahila Hameed Durrani, Minister for Women Development Sindh Ms Shahina Sher Ali, and Ms Zainab Sakhawat and Ms Shehrbano Aman, students from Sindh.



Ms Sameena Nazir first of all invited Ms Zainab Sakhawat, a student from Sindh, to the podium to speak on the importance of the international day of the girl child observed on 11 October every year in the context of girls' education and their rights in Pakistan. Ms Zainab said the day is being observed by the UN since 2011 to draw world attention to the problems and rights of the girls with regard to their empowerment. While pledging support to their rights to education, health, leadership and protection from violence it also highlights the gender inequality they face particularly in the developing countries. So in the international context, she said, it aims to raise awareness on issues like gender discrimination, early marriages, and inequality in education and provide them opportunities to betterment and leadership.

She said girls in developing countries are facing issues like limited education, child labor, early marriages,

gender-based violence, and health hazards. Girls of Pakistan are also confronting gender inequality in the areas of education, health, and protection. She said despite the fact that Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees all children between the ages of five and 16 the right to free and compulsory education, there are 12 million girls across Pakistan who are not going to schools. She said the literacy rate among girls of Pakistan is about 51 percent while it 72 percent among boys. She counted poverty, cultural impediments, and early marriages among main reasons for this significant difference in the literacy rate.



She said girls in our society remain deprived of their basic rights such as education, health, entertainment, economic empowerment, etc. due to our social behaviors. Parents normally focus and spend more on preparing their dowries instead of education hence our girls fall behind their male counterparts in different walks of life. They are not even consulted in the decision making process at national level. She said we will have to stop discrimination between boys and girls while raising them if we want our girls to be empowered and independent.

She added if our government remained silent to the weakening of over half of the population of this country through economic, social, political, religious, and societal discrimination the road to progress will continue to remain bumpy. We will have to shun this approach that girls in any manner are lesser than boys and we will have to stop worrying about marrying them early and provide resources and skills to them to get education and build a better future by tackling problems, Ms Sakhawat concluded.

Ms Sameena then invited Ms Said Gul of Kalash Tribe from Chitral saying she will tell you (the participants) what changes creep in when the girls get the right to education in backward areas like Kalash. Ms Gul told the audience that she started her education as the caretaker of her brother in school. “My mother tasked me to accompany my brother to and from school and this way I got exposed to the school and started treading the path of education.” She said, “I am the first among boys and girls of my 3,600 small community who has become a post-graduate in archaeology and I am also the first museum scientist in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) who has got training from Washington DC in the United States. I am also the first Pakistani to have won the emerging explorer award from National Geographic in 2013.”



She told the rural women that she works under the sun on mountains in hot summers on world heritage sites to present the soft image of Pakistan. I meet 10 or 11 international delegations daily and brief them on the history and tourism in Pakistan.” She said she has achieved so much being a member of the minority Kalash community when a window of opportunity opened to her to get education, “why can’t you do it,” she asked. She said she faced many issues when she was getting education but “my family now doesn’t have any such issues. Today my younger sister Ms Said Nisa, who is sitting in the audience, has got education and she has become the first footballer from the Kalash tribe. She is also conducting a football training for girls in the Punjab University Lahore. And I am very proud that for the first time we are in Lahore to train them in football otherwise it has always been vice versa,” she concluded.



Ms Sameena then asked Dr Samiya Anwar from Archaeology Dept. University of Chakwal to come to the podium as representative of Vice Chancellor Dr M Bilal Khan. Ms Samiya said VC Dr Bilal Khan could not come due to some pressing engagements and she was honored to represent him here at the PODA conference. She said he is a staunch supporter of women empowerment and his support for the conference is quite unwavering. She said that “The worthy vice chancellor believes that all kind of formal or informal education is vital and mandatory for girls.” She said about 30 to 40 years ago people started realizing

the importance of girls education and educating them, today we see a significant number of empowered and independent women prospering and proving themselves in different fields of life including archaeology. Even they are scientists and politicians today.

“But we are facing two main issues that need to be resolved through collective efforts.” The first is the limited opportunities for girls. According to Higher Education Commission (HEC) data only 18 percent of young boys and girls can get admissions in universities for higher education which is very small ratio. The situation, she suggested, can be improved by setting up new universities in remote area. She said Chakwal University is one such example where 70 percent students are girls who are enrolled in different departments.

She said the affordability of education was the second major issue. Parents cannot afford the educational costs due to poverty and the girls of both urban and rural areas alike thus fail to realize their dreams. So our worthy vice chancellor suggests that we should set up a national scholarships fund to provide resources to and resolve financial problems of girls who want to become doctors, engineers etc. or realize their dreams through higher education.’ She said the VC also considers the digital economy an important tool in women empowerment so he feels that women can be given online trainings to launch their own startups or secure employment in the cyber world and become economically empowered. Thus by working on these issues we can create an educational landscape which will make women independent and empowered. She went on to conclude by highlighting her achievements in the field of archaeology saying women from small cities and towns don’t come to this field but she has broken this barrier and is now she is restoring historical temples, and building by reconstructing them through 3d digital models.

Ms Sameena Nazir then invited Ms Shehribano Aman, another student from Sindh, to talk about the legal identity and right to education for girls. Ms Shehribano said since she belongs to Sindh her discussion will contain references to the province. She also referred to article 25-A of the constitution of Pakistan regarding free education of girls and said even the religion does not discriminate between boys and girls when it stresses the need for getting education from cradle to the grave. She said the literacy rate among girls in Sindh is 47 percent which is quite less in comparison to boys. She said about 53 percent Sindhi girls are not going to schools despite the fact that it is their constitutional and social right.



She blamed gender norms and economic situation among several the challenges to girls’ education, saying excessive poverty pushes parents to put education on the backburner and throw minors into child labor. She said Sindh has also bore the brunt of issues due to climate change and floods have damaged the educational infrastructure, thus the girls’ education has been particularly compromised. The lack of quality education in the province, security concerns and fears of harassment of school going girls are also among issues having negative impacts on girls’ education. But she optimistically stressed that change is a continuous process and it always makes its way. She said the government can run public awareness campaigns to strengthen the cause of girls education besides NGOs effectively engaging communities for the same.



Member Punjab Assembly, Parliamentary Secretary for Environment Protection and Climate Change and member Women Protection Authority Punjab Ms. Kanwal Pervaiz Advokate was invited to address thr rural women. She congratulated Ms Sameena Nazir for teaching rural women how to live and showing a graceful, resilient and sagacious face of Pakistani women to the world through this annual event. She said that Pakistani women continue to fight exploitation, face problems in getting the right to inheritance, domestic violence,

and gender discrimination but “I salute PODA for arranging this conference every year as a platform for them to showcase their colors and resilience through empowerment and teach them skills to live this short life with passion and strength.



She counted her achievements as a lawyer, political worker and legislator and said girls education is the only tool that can guarantee them a living standard, and economic, social, and political protection. She said her father did not have any son and they were three sisters. She thanked her father for giving her education reneging on social norms and giving her more power, awareness and courage to achieve what she has today. She asked the rural women to educate their girls so that they become aware of their rights. She remembered the role of women like Fatima Jinnah, Benazir Bhutto, Kulsum Nawaz, and others asking the participants that whenever it comes to the dignity and grace of the country remember these women. “You all should shun political and other differences and forge unity in your ranks and support each other for girls’ rights and education, she concluded.

Ms Sameena at this moment took to the podium and told the audience that so far women from over 100 districts from across Pakistan have arrived here for the conference and some have travelled for two days from areas as far as Skardu and Karachi to reach here. She told the women guests and speakers that they must visit the handicrafts and organic food stalls from areas like Skardu, Tharparkar, and other cities after this session.

Ms Sameena then invited founding President Bonded Labor Liberation Front Ms Ghulam Fatima to talk to the rural women leaders. Ms Fatima said she salutes Ms Sameena for her vision, approach and struggle to have gathered women from over 100 districts from across country which is a significant task. “I can see an enlightened, progressing and stable Pakistan in your bright faces, and it has raised my spirits to see that such talented women like you are contributing to the country’s progress. She said she started working for the girls and women at brick kilns 40 years ago when she was an eighth grade student and visited a brick kiln with her father for the first “then there was no turning back.” She said some of you might have had a glimpse into the lives of these brick kiln girls, women and their families and may have some idea of what they have to go through at the workplace. They have to go out in the open under the sun on nature’s call to relieve themselves since they are not provided proper lavatories, and they even don’t have this facility in their houses in slums.



They even don’t get two meals a day along with proper clothing. Their services are purchased against advances and loans which their men take and women have to mortgage themselves to repay them for years. This way an example is set for other brick kiln workers telling them what can happen to their families if they refuse to continue the bonded labor. She said she doesn’t want to go into details to depress the rural women but wants to tell them that his struggle has so far succeeded in drawing world’s attention to their plight.



She said earlier even our own government officials were not willing to accept that this kind of labor was rampant in our country and when I used to draw their attention to the issue they refuted it and refused to listen asking me to go change the name of my organization. Today they have recognized due to our persistent efforts that the issue is there in the country and its worst form is practiced at the brick kilns, while the women working in the fields in agriculture sector also face the oppression of feudal lords. She said the women laborers in the agriculture sector are also distressed as they face violence while working in the fields with their male family members besides taking care of the house chores and raising their kids and families. She hoped that a large number of women workers and laborers from agriculture sector, brick kilns and women farmers will participate in the 18th Rural Women Leadership Training Conference in 2025.



Ms Fatima went on to add that she has also focused on providing alternative employment to women laborers at brick kilns through skill development. They were offered courses in the trades of beautician, handicrafts, and driving, but she said the whole effort was needed to be collaborated. She asked women to get united and strengthen each other putting aside their political differences and affiliations. She said the legal identity of women was a challenging issue as several of brick kiln women workers don't have the CNICs or the Nikkahnamas and when we go and talk about their social security and legal entitlement we are pointed to the CNICs of their male family members. We tell them that when the mothers, daughters and wives of these men are working they should have their own separate cards made.

She also asked the two women parliamentarians to not support the idea of labor courts because this will be like legalizing slavery. She said extending a loan facility of Rs 100,000 to a woman worker would mean if there are five women in the family and it gets a loan of Rs. 500,000, it would be very difficult for them to repay those loans for generations and this way bonded-labor will go on. She said wherever in the country one goes to an institution to secure loan he/she is legally required to submit documents on income sources, domicile, and CNICs etc. But the brick kiln workers are given loans and advances without those. She asked why they are given loans or advances in the absence of any CNICs, or documents as proof of property or source of income, because this way they and their coming generations are purchased and the outside world gets the impression that Pakistan allows slavery to go on. These are forms of bonded and child labor. Then there cases of harassment, and sexual violence, against women at farms and brick kilns, which she said they don't admit. Every third girl at the brick kilns faces sexual violence which is never reported. So we all should work collectively against oppression of women facing bonded labor and slavery. Then there are workers and laborers belonging to minority communities at the farms and brick kilns particularly Dalits (low caste Hindus). These deprived people from minority community face oppression and injustice on the basis of religion, color, race, caste etc. and sometimes have to face deaths, Shama-Shehzad case (the couple was alive in 2014 in Kasur) is one such example.

Ms Fatima concluded by demanding that women workers and laborers at brick kilns must have legal documents of identification along with proof of work such as employment letters in addition to restrooms at workplace so that they don't have to go out in the open to relieve themselves and they should be given protection and their exploitation must end.

Ms Sameena Nazir appreciated Ms Fatima for her hard work and dedication and called MPA from Punjab Ms Uzma Kardar to speak on her efforts regarding proposed legislation to end early marriages of girls in Punjab. Ms Kardar expressed her joy to be among the rural women leaders and appreciated their courage, dedication, and hard work calling all the women participants the real VIP guests of the event. She said PODA is holding 17th such conference of the rural women leaders across Pakistan and it's not an easy task. She said the international partners who support PODA's endeavors regarding women rights know that Pakistan cannot progress without the progress of over 50 percent women population of Pakistan and without recognizing their rights.



She told the audience that when she first became the lawmaker of the Punjab Assembly she was assigned some duties regarding the gender mainstreaming and then she came to know that every second girl in the age group of 12-18 years was out of school. I then started looking for the causes that why these girls don't go to schools and I discovered that along with poverty, their parents' fears regarding their protection were among the major causes. So for the fear of the unknown with regard to their young daughters and their own vulnerability to protect them they marry them early and even quote Islamic injunctions to justify their action. But Islam says the marriage should take place only when the boys and the girls reach

the age of mental maturity and become able to understand their responsibilities regarding nurturing kids and advancing their families. Now as our tradition of marrying girls young puts them in a difficult situation we started efforts to make a law setting the minimum marriage age for girls at 18 years. When I drew the attention of the then speaker Punjab Assembly Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi to a piece of legislation, I had moved eight months ago, he warned me that I will become the target of wrath of religious quarters hence the bill was put on the back burner.

Then we started meeting the 371 members of the Punjab Assembly individually and briefed them about the piece of legislation, consequently, we managed to get the signatures of 280 members who pledged support to the bill in the assembly. Now I went to the then Law Minister Raja Basharat and showed him the support signatures of the lawmakers for the bill, he got worried a bit but ultimately agreed to take it further. Now we got happy that we have moved a step closer to success and a law will now be in place and the issue of forced early marriages before 18 years will be resolved. But when this whole issue started appearing in the media, our traditions got in the way and statements started appearing in opposition of the proposed law, questioning its passage and calling it un-Islamic.



Now that I have returned as an MPA in the Punjab Assembly I have started work on it again and this time I was heartened to see a verdict of our honorable Lahore High Court on the issue asking the government to remove the marriage age difference of boys and girls in the law and make it uniform. The law allows boys to marry at the age of 18 while the girls can marry at the age of 16 years. So the LHC verdict is quite encouraging for us and we have now taken it upon ourselves to implement the verdict in its true spirit.

She said even the Punjab Chief Minister Ms Maryam Nawaz is also backing it up this time since she has declared the girls and women her redline and she will not tolerate any injustice or discrimination meted

out to them. And she has also instructed that any Punjab government efforts in the fields of education, health, agriculture, or livestock will have 50 percent allocation for girls and women. Earlier, it was like 70 percent for men and 30 percent to women but this will not be the case now. So the chief minister is also supporting you.

We know that about 60 percent of laborers in the rural area are women and let alone the education they even don't have the CNICs. So when they don't have any legal identity there is no social security for them and they can not avail the benefits of any government welfare schemes or measures. So PODA like organizations are giving you awareness on all such issues and making you strong and we are with them and we will extend all sorts of cooperation to them with regards to the early marriages legislation in the Punjab Assembly, she concluded.

At this point Ms Sameena said PODA was working with Ms Kardar with regards to this early marriages legislation in Punjab and is also making such efforts in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.



She then called Balochistan's Education Minister Ms Raheela Hameed Durrani to the podium to address the audience. Ms Raheela Hameed congratulated PODA for holding such a vital and successful conference and recalled that she has attended one earlier a few years ago and this is her second appearance at such an important event. She told the participants that in her province rural women rarely engage in any agriculture activity but the livestock is an important part of their lives. She was of the opinion that women from other provinces may not have any information about Balochistan and its women. She recalled her educational days and political journey and said her parents gave her education and Allah provided

her opportunities to grow and prosper, she added that her political career spans over twenty years wherein she also became a minister and the first ever woman speaker of Balochistan Assembly. "Girls and women often ask me how we can follow you on the path to success, I advise them to move forward with dignity and grace," she said.

She said she appreciates and salutes all those women engaged in the struggle for their rights or have contributed to the cause and "we should not waste or belittle anyone's efforts based on political biases." She said she has seen respect for women at its utmost in Balochistan and "we, the women of Balochistan, work collectively and strengthen each other's efforts for the women's cause."

She said her tenure as speaker Balochistan Assembly lasted for 2 and half years and most laws with regards to women were passed in her era. However, she regretted that an early marriage bill just fell short of getting passed in her time. "But now I am happy to tell you that the Balochistan Cabinet has just approved this piece of legislation and it will soon be tabled in the provincial assembly for approval and I am grateful to my leadership and young Chief Minister Sarfaraz Bugti for this."

She said the CM wants to improve situation in the fields of education and health in Balochistan and where “I can tell you as the education minister that situation is mixed, it is neither good nor bad. She said the population of the province is only about 13.2 million but the area is vast and the inhabitations are very scattered and sparse. Sometimes it takes about four days to cover distance between two polling stations. So our problems are also bigger. She said girls’ education in the province has taken roots as they are talented despite tribal culture. Although about 25 million children are out of schools across country, the Balochistan’s share in this number is only 2.9 million, which is a challenge for us. But we have started a survey to know the causes of children not going to schools. The NGOs and the government in the provinces are also working on the women’s rights and they should move and make their plans in cohesion, she added. She said they should first set their priorities with regards to issues in education, health, and climate change.

Ms Raheela Hameed Durrani concluded by requesting and recommending to Ms Sameena Nazir to arrange the 18th rural women leadership conference in Balochistan and she will fully support and facilitate the event there.



The rural women leaders from amongst the participants were given the opportunity to speak before the last speaker of the session and Ms Sodhi Kohli from Badin, Sindh lauded PODA for giving her awareness and courage to speak for the women’s rights and get education. She said she was now studying in grade 8 and also working with and for the rural women and from the PODA’s platform. She said she also engages with women, police, lawyers and community leaders in connection with crimes against women and she has learnt it all from PODA.

Ms Shahida Wafa Alvi from Muzaffargarh presented a Seraiki poem on women’s rights.



Assistant District Education Officer Kalat Mahjabeen Baloch requested Education Minister Ms Durrani to allow dark colored trousers instead of white ones to girls of grade eight onwards in Balochistan schools from the new academic year as the step will help them relieve of the stress during their periods. Ms Durrani said the suggestion has already been on her table and is under consideration.

This was followed by a theatre performance by Jugni Theatre Group on the issue of early marriages awareness.



Sindh’s Minister for Women Development Ms Shahina Sher Ali was called to the podium as the last speaker of the session Ms Shahina Sher Ali first of all invited PODA and Ms Sameena Nazir to bring the 18th conference to Sindh next year and her government will provide all out support and facilitation.

She said the early marriages of girls are a tragedy and it needs to be seen how we can protect our girls from it. She said Sindh has taken lead on it and formulated a law which bans marriages of both boys and girls before the age of 18 years. The law is applicable to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Our previous government had sent a delegation to Punjab and a letter was also written to then Punjab governor requesting raising minimum marriage age for girls to 18 years from 16 because obtaining CNIC also becomes mandatory at the age of 18. She said the girls are required to sign their Nikkahnamas at three different pages but they are generally not shown the clauses related to their rights and which are normally crossed out. She said her government is planning to hold awareness sessions for girls and women on filling out the document besides updating the Nikkahnamas. Since there is no mention of the CNICs on those we will make it mandatory to attach copies of the CNICs on the first page of the document and it would be challenged in NADRA if not carrying those copies. We are also linking it to NADRA directly.



Ms Shahina Sher Ali said she has normally seen in cases referred to her that girls/women get nothing if they initiate the divorce while there is nothing written in the Nikkahnama that they will have to surrender everything even what they bring as their dowry if this is the case. So this is what happens if those columns in the Nikkahnama concerning girls/women’s rights are crossed out. The lawyers and judges in the court say that by crossing out those columns and posting your signatures on it you have surrendered everything. Even if a girl wants to read her nikkah clauses on the document before signing it she is frowned upon considering it a bad omen. She said we will have to speak up and raise our voices against such practices.



She said there were two very alarming situations in the country first being the early marriages and second rising population. Men having daughters keep producing children for their desire to have more sons and sometimes even marry twice or more for that, thereby keep increasing the population. We need to educate our children on both these issues, if we include chapters on this education in our school syllabi we can improve the situation. We have also issued agriculture cards to women farmers in Sindh in addition to giving them property ownership rights. When they will have house registered under their names they will not become homeless, she concluded.

Ms Sameena Nazir praised Ms Shahina Sher Ali for her thoughts and told her that PODA was running a project in 41 districts of Punjab against early marriages and raising the marriage age to 18 years and the program will be taken to Balochistan as well.

At this point the participants of the conference were invited to share their thoughts or ask questions, Journalist from Quetta Ms Fizza Kanwal said there was need to work on the impact climate change and natural calamities on women in the province.

Ms Rani Waheeda Malik from Kot Addu raised a divorce case of two sisters wherein their dowries were not returned and the divorces happened within a short span after marriages. She was asked to contact the Legal Aid program of PODA.



Ms Aqeela Naz from Khanewal asked about the future of government schools in Punjab after privatization.

Balochistan Education Minister Ms Rahila Durrani while responding to the question said the Punjab minister can better respond to this question but she thinks when the government school teachers will not go to perform their duties the government will have to explore the options like privatization.

Ms Zakiya Ali from Pakpattan said the landlords and mullahs in the villages were hand in glove over the issue of early marriages and the mullahs should be punished for conducting child marriages.



Ms Amtul Aleem from Karachi asked Ms Shahina Sher Ali that she tried to stop an early marriage but the mother was divorced by her husband. What should be done in such cases?

Ms She Ali while responding said there is a complaint cell in the province to look into such matters and she should call them at 1049.



In the end the speakers of the session were honored with awards and the day's proceedings concluded with a beautiful dance performance by Asfandyar Khattak.



DAY - 2

Tuesday, 22 October, 2024 from 9:30am to 10:30am



Case of Women Agricultural Workers in Pakistan

پاکستان میں زراعت سے وابستہ خواتین کے حقوق کا مقدمہ



Awaz Foundation Pakistan



Working together
on Sustainable
Development
Goals (SDGs)

Case of Women Agricultural Workers in Pakistan

پاکستان میں زراعت سے وابستہ خواتین کے حقوق کا مقدمہ

Session Proceedings:

Ms. Sameena Nazir, Executive Director of PODA started the session by welcoming all guests especially rural women who traveled from far-flung areas from all across Pakistan to attend the conference. She invited the Moderator of the session by AWAZ, Ms. Maryam Amjad, Program Manager with Mr. Zia-ur-Rehman, Director AWAZ.



Mr. Zia-ur-Rehman gave the brief introduction about AWAZ-CDS that Awaz Foundation Pakistan, also known as the Centre for Development Services (AWAZ-CDS), is a non-profit, non-governmental, and non-political organization. It works to improve the lives of vulnerable groups, especially women and young people, across Pakistan. The organization has been active since 1995 and is committed to promoting social, economic, and political development for these marginalized communities.



AWAZ-CDS is registered under Pakistan's Societies Act of 1860. Its main goal is to help achieve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the years 2015-2030, which focus on ending poverty, promoting equality, and improving lives for all. The organization works to ensure that everyone, especially people from excluded or disadvantaged groups, has access to their rights and opportunities.

AWAZ-CDS is recognized globally as a strong advocate for marginalized communities. It is a member of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and works with several other international networks. The foundation is particularly focused on representing and supporting people with disabilities, religious minorities, and transgender individuals, who often face discrimination and are excluded from many aspects of society.



The session you mentioned, led by Ms. Maryam, focused on advocating for women agricultural workers in Pakistan. The term "advocacy" here refers to the effort to raise awareness and push for positive changes for these women, who play a key role in farming but often face challenges such as limited access to resources, poor working conditions, and gender inequality.

The session was accompanied by a documentary, which likely highlighted the stories and struggles of women farmers in Pakistan. Through this film, the aim was to show the importance of women in agriculture and to highlight the challenges they face in a male-dominated field.

Women like Ms. Khanzadi from Sindh and Ms. Kousar Mai from Punjab were present at the session to share their personal experiences and to represent the voices of women farmers from their regions. They might have discussed issues such as lack of access to land, decision-making power, fair wages, and the impact of climate change on their work.



The goal of the session and the documentary was likely to:

1. Raise awareness about the important role women play in agriculture.
2. Highlight their struggles and the need for better support and policies.
3. Advocate for gender equality and better working conditions for women farmers.
4. Encourage government action to improve the situation for women in agriculture.

At the end of the session, Ms. Sameena Nazir, the Executive Director of PODA (a women's organization), made an important point. She said that women should be recognized as farmers at every level, including in policy-making. This means that women's role in agriculture should be officially acknowledged, and they should have a say in decisions that affect farming, such as laws, resources, and support for the agricultural sector.

Then, Mr. Zia spoke up and emphasized that agriculture should be treated as a workplace. By recognizing agriculture as a workplace, it would help ensure that women working in farming get the rights and protections they deserve, like fair wages, better working conditions, and legal rights. This would be a big step in improving the lives of women farmers.

Mr. Zia also expressed his gratitude and thanks to their partners, the NARI Foundation from Sukkur and the Jag Foundation from Rahim Yar Khan. These organizations have been working alongside them to support women farmers and strengthen their advocacy efforts.

Finally, Ms. Sameena Nazir honored the team members of AWAZ-CDS by distributing shields as a token of appreciation for their hard work and dedication in supporting the cause of women farmers. This gesture was meant to recognize and thank the people who contributed to the success of the session and the ongoing efforts to improve the lives of women in agriculture. Then, AWAZ-CDS’s team captured a group photo with Ms. Sameena Nazir.



DAY - 2

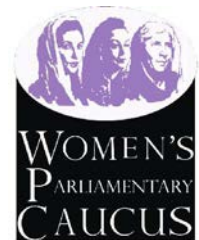
Tuesday, 22 October, 2024 from 10:45am - 1:00pm



Strategy Session

Women's Rights Commitments in Political Party Manifestos: Joint Review for Future Actions by Rural Women and Parliamentarians"

سیاسی جماعتوں کے منشور میں خواتین کے حقوق سے متعلق وعدے: ممبران پارلیمنٹ اور دیہی خواتین کا ان پر عمل درآمد کے حوالے سے جائزہ



Women's Rights Commitments in Political Party Manifestos: Joint Review for Future Actions by Rural Women and Parliamentarians"

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The strategy session on "**Women's Rights Commitments in Political Parties Manifestos,**" organized by PODA in the morning session on the second day of conference and co-funded by the European Union and National Endowment for Democracy with the collaboration of partnered organizations with ABKT, Roshan Rahen, and STEP moderated by Ms. Saleema Munir Director Programs at PODA. Ms. Sameena Nazir, Executive Director of PODA, emphasized the significance of reviewing political parties manifestos 2024, focusing on enhancing women's inclusion and empowerment. Representatives from six major political parties were present, underscoring their commitments to women's rights and equality initiatives in Pakistan.

Review of Manifestos: Reflection of Gender Equality & Women Rights Commitments in the Manifestos of 7 Major Political Parties (Pakistan)

The 2024 Gender Analysis of Political Party Manifestos, presented by Ms. Naheeda Abbasi from PODA, offers a comprehensive evaluation of the commitments toward women's rights in the manifestos of Pakistan's major political parties (ANP, Jamaat-e-Islami, JUI-F, MQM, PML-N, PPP, and PTI). With 167 parties registered for the upcoming general election, the analysis is focused on women's rights regarding education, health, political participation, agriculture, economic empowerment, protections against early-age marriages and gender-based violence in their manifestos.

Education: All major political parties committed in their manifestos to enhancing educational facilities for women and girls, proposing measures such as free and subsidized education, gender-equality awareness, sanitary facilities and separate washrooms in schools. A focus on equal opportunities for higher education and educational loans underscored the common theme of reducing gender disparities.

Health: Prioritizing healthcare for women particularly in rural areas, the parties emphasized free healthcare services, child and maternal health, universal health coverage and reproductive health. Plans included for the distribution of affordable sanitary products and the training of female healthcare professionals in underserved regions.

Political Participation: The parties highlighted intentions to increase women's representation in political roles, and decision-making positions. They proposed an easy process of CNIC registration for women, promoting women's political participation, safeguarding their legal rights, ensuring increased candidacies and leadership roles.

Agriculture: Parties advocated for the equal treatment of female agricultural workers, proposing reforms for their protection and inclusion. Gender-inclusive land reforms, registration of female agricultural workers and awareness initiatives aimed at economic integration in rural communities were frequently emphasized.

Economic Empowerment: Manifestos included commitments to support women to run businesses, safe work environments, job placements, maternity leave and transport services for working women and efforts facilitating economic independence and vocational training to empower women financially.

Protection from Early-Age Marriages and Gender-Based Violence: Parties pledged strict enforcement against child marriages, honour killings, and trafficking, aiming to raise awareness and strengthen legal protections. Legal reforms and community education programs were outlined to prevent forced marriages and protect children’s rights.



This session provided a platform to propose recommendations and ensure rural voices are heard in the implementation of these commitments. The strategies outlined aim to bridge the gap between rural women and policymakers, aiming for tangible progress on women's rights and empowerment across Pakistan.

Ms Shahida Irshad, Member, Jamhuri Watan Party, Quetta, Balochistan

Ms. Shahida Irshad, a member of the Jamhuri Watan Party from Quetta, Balochistan, emphasized the significance of attending the conference with a delegation of women. She highlighted the importance of having a platform to voice their challenges and concerns. Ms. Shahida Irshad noted that true independence for women hinges on economic empowerment, which is hindered



by the persistent postponement of elections in regions like Quetta and Lasbela. This delay limits women's representation in governance which is essential for implementing and advocating for women-focused policies. She expressed gratitude to Ms. Sameena Nazir and PODA for annually including and empowering them in these discussions, which encourages their sense of visibility and engagement in national discourse.

Ms. Naila Sayed- Youth Wing (Jammat e Islami)

Ms. Naila Sayed, representing the Youth Wing of Jamat-e-Islami, opened her remarks by warmly welcoming all attendees and expressing gratitude for the platform provided. She highlighted her party's commitment to inclusivity and democracy, emphasizing their stance against gender discrimination and poverty. She highlighted several legislative initiatives aimed at supporting women, including a bill for six months of maternity leave, measures to address workplace harassment, and the introduction of women-friendly institutions. She stressed the importance of women's rights awareness, economic empowerment through vocational centres and free education for girls up to matriculation. Additionally, she mentioned free health services and advocated for women's property rights in accordance with Shariah law noting that without these rights, women would face barriers in participating in elections or traveling abroad. Her message reinforced the party's dedication to providing equitable opportunities and facilities for all citizens without discrimination.



Ms Shahida Waheed Khan of ANP from Mardan



Ms Shahida Waheed Khan, representing the Awami National Party (ANP) from Mardan, passionately articulated her party's extensive efforts in promoting women's rights, inspired by the legacy of Bacha Khan, who dedicated his life to fighting for equality. She emphasized that true national progress cannot be achieved without educating women, highlighting the introduction of initiatives like 30% loans for women entrepreneurs and the establishment of a Women's Commission in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) that promotes merit-based vocational training centre. She discussed about legislation including harassment, domestic violence bills and ongoing advocacy for women's property rights. Additionally, she stressed the commitment to equal educational opportunities, ensuring that women have access to the same number of colleges and universities as men. She said that the ANP's manifesto is not just theoretical but actionable underscoring the principle of gender equality. She concluded her remarks by thanking PODA for providing a platform to discuss these vital issues. Ms. Saleema Munir also acknowledged her contributions the importance of such deliberations.

Ms Farheen Mughal PPP representative Hyderabad

Ms Farheen Mughal, a representative of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) from Hyderabad, opened her remarks with poetry, expressing gratitude to Ms. Sameena for organizing the women's convention. She emphasized the importance of women asserting their presence in government to combat patriarchy and called on rural women to vote with integrity. She highlighted the passage of three significant bills related to sexual harassment, workplace harassment, and child marriages, advocating for increased political representation of women despite the challenges they face, including character defamation. She criticized the Election Commission of Pakistan's report for inaccurately representing women's participation in politics, asserting that it is now 58%. She commended Ms. Sameena's initiative to unite women from diverse backgrounds, insisting that they should be recognized for their identity as women rather than compared to men in their struggles.



Ms Ruksana Bhatti PMLN Hafizabad PWD (Advocate)



Ms Ruksana Bhatti, an advocate and representative (PML-N) from Hafizabad, expressed her gratitude to PODA team for recognizing the challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PWDs). She highlighted her extensive experience working with various NGOs since 1990 and her success in winning general seats in the elections of 2001 and 2005. She emphasized the need for public spaces to be equipped with ramps for easier access for PWDs, noting that the STEP organization has made significant contributions to ramp installation at Lok Virsa. She reiterated her appreciation to PODA for its support in these efforts.

Ms Bismillah Irum Khanewal Roshan ED Social activist

It is imperative that women receive their rights regardless of whether they have to ask for them. The representation of women in election committees should be equal to that of men, ensuring balanced participation in local governance. The local government elections, as mandated by Article 140, must be conducted by the provinces without delay. PODA has actively provided recommendations addressing these pressing issues, reinforcing the importance of women's inclusion in political processes and advocating for equitable representation at all levels of government.



Ms. Shad Begum ED ABKT



Ms. Shad Begum, Executive Director of ABKT, she has come with a 25 women delegation, symbolizing a collective strength aimed at empowering women in politics. Representing a network of women counselors from 11 districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), she emphasized the importance of enhancing their skills to compete for election seats in the future. She highlighted that women constitute half of the population, called for the speedy mobilization of women voters, asserting that political parties must recognize gender equality in all spheres of political process.

Dr. Shahida Rehmani, Chairperson Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC)

Dr. Shahida Rehmani, Chairperson of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC), expressed her appreciation for Ms. Sameena and her team for their efforts in recognizing Rural Women Day. She highlighted the significant population of Sindh, emphasizing the multi-tasking abilities of rural women. She announced plans to propose a resolution at the government level, noting that 25 acres of land have been allocated to women farmers. Additionally, she discussed the introduction of an agricultural women's card, which provides essential health, education, financial, and technical services for female farmers, along with the importance of BISP in flood relief efforts.



Ms. Ghazala Gola, Deputy Speaker, Provincial Assembly Baluchistan



Ms. Ghazala Gola, Deputy Speaker of the Provincial Assembly of Balochistan, spoke about the historical taboo surrounding women's names and emphasized her pride in representing the PPP. She expressed gratitude to Ms. Sameena Nazir for her advocacy in supporting resolutions for Balochistan and highlighted the significant contributions of Benazir Bhutto and Bilawal Bhutto in empowering women and during flood. She called for collective action to advance women's rights with enthusiasm and mentioned initiatives like the Pink Buses to promote women's mobility and safety in the region.

Ms Pushpa Kumari Council Member Sindh Minority Rights

Ms Pushpa Kumari, Council Member for Sindh Minority Rights, highlighted her role as the first female member of the Human Rights Committee in Pakistan serving as a council member from 2023-2026. She emphasized the importance of Article 36, which focuses on the protection of minorities. While acknowledging the allocation of 33% representation for women, she advocated for a push



towards 50% equality, insisting that minorities should actively engage in discussions to address their issues rather than merely occupying seats in the assembly.

Question Answer Session

Ms Naheeda Abbasi took over the question-answer session

- Ms Fizza Kanwal from Quetta, Balochistan raised a critical question: "In our flood-affected area, where women are delivering babies on the roadside, where is the protection and support for women, and why is implementation of policies so lacking?"
- Ms Aqsa Mirwani, representing Awaran, Balochistan, She said that the critical issue of education in her region, where the education rate stands at zero percent. She actively works to promote education for girls and to combat early child marriages.

Ms. Ghazala Gola appreciated the impactful work of Ms. Aqsa Mirwani, particularly her advocacy for girls' education in Awaran, Balochistan. Reflecting on the recent floods that severely affected Baluchistan's infrastructure, agriculture, and road systems, she said significant challenges faced by women in these regions. She emphasized that the Balochistan government, under the leadership of the Mr Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and with the active support of Chief Minister, is making concerted efforts to address these issues and working on it.



Ms Qaisra Ismail from Sargodha, what is the reasons of not giving political party tickets to women who are working on grass root levels? Why has there been limited focus on advancing agricultural technologies for rural women farmers, and when will new technologies be introduced to benefit them? Previously, women had 33% representation in local government, how and when are the local elections planned to ensure continued representation in Punjab and Balochistan?

Ms Naseera KP Mansera, billions in funding available for women in BISP, why are these funds distributed to women in the form of charity instead of more sustainable support? Why don't we focus on this on development industries for women and empowerment opportunities?



Participant from Sindh According to the Article 25-A of the Constitution ensures the right to quality education for children aged 5 to 16, while other laws permit child labor from age 14, how can we effectively ensure these children receive a continuous education while preventing early workforce entry?



Ms. Marvi Badin, Sindh Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by the PPP Party declaring six canals of the Indus River for Sindh, could providing water access to Badin’s farmers improve the agricultural conditions and overall situation in the region.



Mr. Farhatullah Babar Senator PPP

Mr. Farhatullah Babar, Senator from the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), warmly welcomed all women, compliments PODA and Sameena Nazir acknowledged all donors and partners for their cooperation for their significant contributions to empowering voices within the community. He emphasized that the event was not solely focused on women's issues but also aimed at strengthening the federation as a whole. He articulated the importance of collective efforts, he said that this is PODA's motto, “Sab ko ehle awaz banaya,” signifies a platform that empowers women's voices across various sectors.



He highlighted that the achievements made so far are not just the result of one person's efforts but rather a collective effort from various individuals, organizations, and political parties. He encouraged participants to engage actively, pointing out that the more they contribute, the clearer the remaining challenges become. He reminded everyone that setbacks are part of the journey and urged them to keep moving forward, leading those who look to them for guidance.

Finally, he admired Ms. Sameena Nazir for her work in spreading knowledge and awareness, asserting that her determination is a crucial part of their shared success. He concluded by inspiring attendees to persevere, likening their journey to climbing a mountain where persistence and resilience are essential.

Ms Zakia Bibi Pakpattan, Punjab I have registered more than 13000 CNICs NADRA requirement MNA MPA Letter which they do not usually give, which are typically difficult to acquire. The process involves financial costs for citizens and requires additional documentation from the union council.



Mr. Farhatullah Babar, Senator responded that more than one crore women have not been registered CNIC due to which they cannot become a part of the electoral process. Child registration issues lead to early marriages, and in many cases, children are forcibly converted to different religions. In our political party manifestos we have highlighted these issues.



DAY - 3

Thursday, 24 October, 2024 from 9:30am - 10:30am



Advocacy Session

Special Session on Women's Rights to Property

خواتین کا جائیداد کی ملکیت کا حق



Special Session on Women's Rights to Property

خواتین کا جائیداد کی ملکیت کا حق

The last day of the 17th PODA Rural Women Leadership Training Conference on Thursday 24 October 2024 opened with an hour long Advocacy Session from 9:30 to 10:30 am. This Special Session on Women's Right to Property was organized by Legal Aid Society (LAS), Karachi. Senior Project Manager LAS Ms. Rukhsana Parveen Khokhar, who came all the way from Karachi conducted the session.



The event took off with a welcome note from Ms. Sameena Nazir. She welcomed Ms. Rukhsana Khokhar from Legal Aid Society (LAS), who, she said, has joined the conference for the very first time, all the way from Karachi, so the audience should welcome her with huge applause.

Ms. Rukhsana shared the work and aims of her organization, and urged women to know their rights and fight for them. She said the women should understand how they can achieve this empowerment. She said her organization stresses on three main points, first is know the law, which means they should not only develop an understanding of the law themselves but also help transfer that understanding to those whom they come in contact with and give them awareness, second point is use the law, she said laws are

made for us and our protection so we should use them, the third point is shape the law, if we think there is some gap or deficiency, some lacunas or bottlenecks in the law or some reforms are required, we at LAS also work collectively and sit and talk to policymakers to get it done. She said we work in three thematic areas – Access to Justice: means justice is for all and should be accessible to all, Gender and Child Security: which includes transgender, vulnerable communities, and religious minorities along with women and children and we work for the protection and rights of them all, and the third is Climate Resilience: as you all know almost every year Pakistan sees torrential monsoon rains, floods or anything that comes in our way as disaster and we don't have any strategy in terms of resilience so we raise awareness in this regard and we also conduct researches.

So far we have listened to direct telephone complaint calls of about 450,000 callers with regard to legal assistance and conducted over 4,500 awareness sessions in different communities on different topics, and we have engaged over 130,000 people from different communities besides conducting and writing over 50 researches and research papers in addition to making over 25 documentaries. In addition we have trained over 700 paralegals. This information can be very valuable to you and is there on our website too since not every person here is a lawyer.



However, we cannot be the women leaders if we don't know our basic rights or the laws. At least one should have some basic knowledge in this regard. Let me tell you about a very unique project at LAS which may be the pioneer work in Pakistan. The Sindh High Court's Chief Justice, Justice Nasir Aslam when got retired he established a help desk at the Karachi Central Jail to provide free legal consultation to the

aggrieved people. To make it sustainable the desk was converted into a call center in 2014 and it was named the Legal Advisory Call Center. The British High Commission in Islamabad liked our idea and they got involved at this point. In 2018 this call center became a program with initial seed money from the British High Commission. Now this Sindh Legal Advisory Call Center (SLACC) is being run as a stunning public-private partnership program under which 10 senior lawyers enrolled in the high court are available 9:00 am to 5:00 pm at the center to provide you any legal consultation on family, property, criminal matters etc. or issues linked to documentation. Women, children, law students, from all of Pakistan call us. We have an impressive system there under which the callers' identity and confidentiality is maintained and they are provided relief in the form of free-legal advice, the toll free number for the SLACC is 0800-70806. She said the callers can talk to us with complete confidence on this number and our lawyers give you free advice and if you are from Sindh and can't afford a lawyer or you are a woman or from the vulnerable community we give you priority on many occasions and even present your case in the court.

Now being women leaders many a times you face such problems that make you feel disempowered and think whom to talk to or consult, SLACC is, in simple words, basically your friend in such a situation. It works from 9 to 5 and calls made after five get recorded in our system and our lawyer calls you back first thing in the next morning. You are also given an option to choose between men or women lawyers to talk to.



We have also introduced a unique thing -- an AI-based digital lawyer's concept- called NAZ Assist. If you visit our website, NAZ Assist will pop up and ask in which language you need help. It is multilingual, with Sindhi, Urdu, English and other options and when you will type your problem it will respond to you and guide you step by step on the process you need to follow in accordance with the Pakistani law. If you still cannot understand it will connect you live to a lawyer. So it's a major support facility for you. Our team is here and they have the brochures about it, get those from them and distribute and spread like wildfire in your areas. Because the country cannot progress till the women get to know their legal rights. This digital lawyer NAZ Assist is a first step to this awareness. Just to give you a glimpse we have so far filed 1,900 cases out of which 1,400 have been disposed of.

In addition we also work on human rights and strategic litigation. Now what is strategic litigation, it is basically a litigation or a petition which is filed in public interest and the decisions on such litigations impact wider communities. The examples of such litigations are Christian marriage and divorce act which forbids a Christian woman from getting divorce until accused of adultery, similarly our colleague Ms Pushpa Kumari will confirm that under some outdated laws our Hindu women and girls cannot claim inheritance. So we are engaged in strategic litigation and working on it against the laws that are hindering our women's empowerment and progress.



Furthermore, our services include advice, facilitation, aid and awareness and mediation, Ms Rukhsana Khokhar added. She said she was an enrolled mediator with Sindh High Court and the Law and Justice Department Islamabad, and gets involved in mediations and dispute resolution through a Musaleha International Center for Arbitration. "As you know our courts are burdened with thousands of pending cases and the solution is that we have to go to out of court settlement, mediation and dispute resolution which are normal international practices. So this Musaleha International Center for Arbitration which is an initiative of the LAS provides the mediation services in family dispute cases and other cases if approached even through the call center helpline, we don't provide these mediation services for high level criminal and heinous cases.

Now since you are women leaders, you must know when more and more people in your area get relief through more and more cases you bring to us and facilitate them and their issues get resolved more and more empowered they will get and more and more they will talk about progress. Now how can people approach you with these cases, well, sometime they walk into your offices, or even approach you on social media, or through outreach activities or field referrals, even the government officials and SCOs send them to you. At LAS we have our own case management system as soon as we get a case registered and receive the first statement our own tracker, record, and document system becomes active to efficiently provide relief to maximum number of people and our efforts are impacting people on a wider level.

Thanks to PODA and this session today that the ripple effect of these efforts will reverberate across all country now and more success stories will come to fore. When we come next year for the 18th rural women conference we will strive to capture as much success stories as possible from the far off districts across all the four provinces to show to the participants the fruits of this conference that more and more people are reaching out to us.

Now let us come to our main topic for which we have assembled here, legal property rights of women, which women generally have in the properties of their parents and husbands. Ms Rukhsana Khokhar said generally women in our country take up the responsibility of house chores in their in-laws/husbands homes after marriage and men go out to work and earn livelihood. It means that when the husbands are paid for their work, women get involved in the unpaid labor work. Now if that woman who spends eight, 10, 15, or 20 years at her husband’s home doing these house chores daily and raising his children, taking care of his family, gets divorced for some reasons, she does not get anything from her husband’s property made in that period despite that she facilitated him earn and buy that property through her unpaid labor work at his home.

She should have a share in that property, but it’s a tragedy in our country that when a woman gets divorced only two or three things are focused in her favor – dower and the dowry and a maintenance allowance in case of pregnancy or children but the property made during the period of marriage whether movable or immovable is registered in the name of husband and she is not given anything from it. Hence they are thrown out of that home empty handed after so many years of unpaid labor work. That is the main reason that women burn their lives in such relationships, wherein they go through torture and violence, only thinking they have nowhere to go if they leave this shelter. But let us take a vow to end such wrongful practice.

Now let us move forward to our presentation. Many countries of the world have a law that deals with the concept of matrimonial property. It deals with the situation of divorce or separation between couples and allows a woman to get compensation if a marriage ends. The presentation contains videos clips on right to inheritance, journey of paralegals and where do they stand today, and how can you get empowered.





In the first video clip a woman narrates her story saying she has been married for 17 years, and her husband is a drug addict. He beats her with batons and doesn't give her any sustenance. She said he has previously given her divorce two or three times and kicked her out of his house. "I had nowhere to go with kids, my father and brothers are poor and could not take me so I lived in his house for three years, where he beat me and broke my teeth repeatedly asking me to leave his house so I left. Now nobody gives me anything to eat, I don't know how I will fulfil my needs.

Now a paralegal speaks in the video clip saying matrimonial property is the property acquired jointly by the husband wife before or after the marriage whether movable or immovable it includes house, land, home accessories etc. Pakistani women have limited access to education and employment opportunities and with these limitations when they get to earn something they normally hand it over to their fathers, brothers or husbands and still remain dependent on them for their personal needs. In our Islamic societies the men normally control the financial matters in a family and women don't have any or very limited contribution in property because either they are doing unpaid domestic labor duties or if they are earning, have very meagre earning compared to men. So when any situation arises where a woman has to end marriage she is the one who suffers more losses because they have no share in matrimonial property which is mostly registered in the name of men.

The video clip now shows case studies of women who were telling with heavy hearts that their marriages ended and they had nothing in their pockets afterwards and whatever they contributed to their families and home making by selling their jewelry or hard earned money went down the drain and was not counted. One woman said she sold everything to provide money to her husband for doing business but he divorced me without repaying me anything.

Married women, it was stated in the video clip, contribute to the family in two ways, if they have earnings they spend those in family or if they have inherited property or something in their dowries they spend it in the family, still they don't get any share in the property made during this marriage period. One woman said she spent her ten years earning on constructing a house for the family but she did not get anything. She regretfully said it she had spent this much of her earnings on her education or learning some skills she would have had a better social and financial status. She said she used to give home tuitions and did sewing at home and when she wanted to fulfill her desire to do a beautician's course her husband refused to pay for it saying he does not have spare money and I should forget it.

Now women take care of their husbands' families, raise children and do house chores which all is counted as unpaid work but this non-financial contribution enables their husbands go out of homes and do their jobs and businesses efficiently and make properties. But when they end marriages their contributions are given no value and not compensated for. Hence when she gets divorced with one, two, or more kids, she doesn't have any place to go nor any asset to bank upon. And after divorce it becomes very difficult for her to prove her share in such matrimonial properties. In such situations she only gets dower, dowry, and maintenance after divorce.

At the end of the videos Ms Rukhsana Khokhar told the audience that 97 percent or 113 million women in the country are deprived of their right to property so it was necessary to discuss it in detail in today's session so that women leaders get awareness and when they come for the next year's conference they have some positive news about the change in the situation.

Ms Rukhsana Khokhar said denial of the right to property of women also contributes to their vulnerability and opens ways to all kinds of harassment and oppression against them. She said women doesn't have awareness about their legal or property rights and cultural attitudes are also a factor in this issue. If a woman as sister demands share in the father's property she is called shameless. Then they are also not expected to see and read their Nikkahnamas particularly the clauses related to their rights and which are normally left unfilled rather stricken out. She suggested that women should first of all break this taboo that they cannot become nikkahkhwans or nikkah registrars. They should fill out their nikkahnamas and don't let anyone strike out the clauses about their rights. Then they should also get it declared mandatory to include CNICs or B Forms in the Nikkahnamas to put an end to underage marriages.



She also called it tragic that many women are denied the right to property because they don't get their CNICs. "So how can things move forward in matters of property when women don't have the basic document of identity?" it took 10 years to a woman in litigation to get her share in her father's property because she did not have the CNIC. Then there are issues related to access and mobility, frequent court appearances, affording lawyers, getting through the complicated legal system all these points are major barriers in women's right to property we need to work towards their solution.

DAY - 2

Wednesday, 23 October, 2024 from 2:00pm - 4:30pm



Strategy Session 2

Legislation for 18 years as minimum age of marriage for girls in Pakistan – Challenges and Opportunities

پاکستان میں لڑکیوں کی کم از کم شادی کی عمر 18 سال کرنے کے حوالے سے قانون سازی: مسائل اور مواقع

Legislation for 18 years as minimum age of marriage for girls in Pakistan – Challenges and Opportunities

پاکستان میں لڑکیوں کی کم از کم شادی کی عمر 18 سال کرنے کے حوالے سے قانون سازی: مسائل اور مواقع

On the second day of the 17th Rural Women Leadership Conference at Lok Virsa in Islamabad on 23 October 2024, an after-lunch strategy session was arranged on Legislation for 18 Years as Minimum Age of Marriage for Girls in Pakistan – Challenges and Opportunities. The session was held in collaboration with the Population Welfare Dept. of Punjab and Women International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) while the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Islamabad funded it.



The prominent speakers of the session among others were Norway's Ambassador to Pakistan H.E Per Albert Ilsaas, Deputy Speaker Balochistan Assembly Ms Ghazala Gola, District Population Welfare Officer Rawalpindi Ms Shirin Sukhan, Executive Director PODA Ms Sameena Nazir, PODA Legal Adviser Khawaja Zahid Naseem Advocate, Ms Fizza Kanwal, a woman journalist from Quetta, Balochistan and others.

Ms. Nabeela Aslam, Project Manager Reduce Early Marriages to Enhance Gender Equality (REMS) moderated the strategy session. She set the stage for taking the discussion forward by introducing the topic and giving some background information to the audience. She said the Punjab was following and implementing the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 which sets the minimum marriage age for girls at 16 years and boys at 18 years. She mentioned that Member Punjab Assembly and Chief Minister's Focal Person on Polio Eradication Ms Uzma Kardar and Population Welfare Minister of Sindh Ms Shahina Sher Ali spoke on the issue a day earlier in the last session as it was directly linked to the rights of the girl child. She recalled that the Sindh Minister Ms Shahina declared early marriages as the main cause of inflated population increase ratios.



She said PODA was making efforts to get passed a legislation in the Punjab Assembly setting the minimum marriage age of girls also at 18 years instead of 16 and when passed the legislation will allow girls to complete their studies which is their basic right. Besides, she added, this will also help them in developing a better understanding about of their basic rights and their lives in addition to facilitating them in acquiring skills leading to economic empowerment and ending their dependence on others. This way they will be able to take their decisions independently in a better and informed manner.

Ms Nabeela first of all invited woman journalist from Quetta, Balochistan Ms Fizza Kanwal to inform the audience about the early marriages situation in her province. Ms Kanwal said the situation was no different from the rest of the country and such marriages were quite common despite efforts being made to get approved a law to curtail the early child marriages from Balochistan Assembly. She also mentioned the vulnerability of women and girls in the face of pandemics and natural calamities like floods and droughts. She said traditions like Vani to end old animosities and tribal feuds also worsen the plight of women. She said though NGOs and relevant government agencies are working for the improvement of the situation the pace of work remains slow and needs to be expedited.



Ms Nabeela then asked PODA's Legal Advisor Khwaja Zahid Naseem Advocate to pinpoint some specific legal aspects and contradictions in the laws regarding the marriage ages. Advocate Naseem called the strategic session a significant effort by PODA on this sensitive topic as all stakeholders were brought under one roof to discuss the legal aspects and perspectives of the issue. He said several queries were raised in the last session of the first day on the rights of the girl child which related to early marriages and mostly touched the social aspects of the issue. He said the legal aspects would be discussed today.

He said that so far only Sindh has passed a law raising the minimum marriage age of girls from 16 to 18 years while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Punjab continue to follow the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. The pre-partition law was made by the then government in line with the needs of that time and it should be to be reviewed today, he added. Advocate Khwaja Zahid Naseem said just two months ago a law has been introduced for the Christian community in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) which sets the minimum marriage age for Christian boys and girls at 18 years.

He pointed out a legal lacuna that the law of the land defines a minor as a boy or a girl under 18 years while the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act sets the minimum marriage age of a girl at 16 years which means that a minor is allowed to marry. Thus burdening a minor by allowing her to enter into an act of a mature person. He said the rural women should know that facilitating or conducting a child marriage is a cognizable offence and those involved in it whether they are nikkah khwans, nikkah registrars, witnesses, or even parents can be arrested and punished. He asked the rural women leaders to report such underage marriages taking place in their areas immediately to police, Assistant Commissioners, Tehsildars etc. He said if women report such incidents even once in their areas and action is taken it will have a significant impact. He said usually the law is violated in the name of sharai nikkah, which are normally not registered. The sharai nikkah is nothing because it cannot be registered, he added. He said over 90 percent countries of the Muslim world allow boys and girls to marry at the minimum age of 18.

He said when Sindh passed the law to raise minimum marriage age for girls to 18, the Federal Shariat Court (FSC) was moved to declare the law un-Islamic, and the court verdict did the opposite saying there was nothing un-Islamic in the law. The advocate said recently the Lahore High Court has also directed the Punjab government to raise the marriage age of girls from 16 to 18 years. He said it is now duty of all of us to write letters to the Punjab government, our legislative assemblies and law ministries to implement the court orders and amend the law to raise minimum marriage age for girls to 18 years from 16 to end early marriages.

Rawalpindi District's Population Welfare Officer Ms Shireen Sukhan asked the participating women leaders to become ambassadors for the cause of reducing early marriages and spread the message across every nook and corner of the country. She said the implementation of the laws concerning early marriages was something very vital. She counted the harms of early marriages and said health issues were the main consequence of this practice. She said Pakistan is among those countries where maternal mortality rates (MMRs) are higher and the early or child marriages are the main reason behind high MMR because the bodies of young girls are yet to be mature for the pregnancy and childbirth processes. She said as the young girls have higher chances of death during pregnancies and childbirth the newborns of such mothers are also weak and have high chances of mortality. She said if the young mothers survive the early pregnancies and childbirths, they fall victim to chronic, lifelong health issues. In addition these girls and women also don't have access to balanced diet and face malnutrition along with their newborns due to poverty which further exacerbates their health problems.



She also listed the gender-based violence and psychological harms like low self-esteem as the consequences of early marriages saying these young girls are yet to become mentally strong and mature but have to take up the responsibilities of homemakers hence become vulnerable and development and growth of their personality gets stalled. She went on to add that early marriages leave girls with reduced chances of completing their education hence stalling their career's progress and with incomplete education they have a handicap when it comes to participating in raising incomes of their families amid rising economic depression. She linked raising minimum marriage age for girls to a decreased fertility period hence having a direct bearing on arresting the higher population growth rates naturally. This way we can relieve our limited resources of the rising population burden, she added.



An official of the Child Protection Bureau Mr Rao Khalil told the audience that the chairperson of his bureau Ms Sara Ahmed, who is also a Member of the Punjab Assembly, in collaboration with PODA, has moved a piece of legislation in the Assembly seeking to raise the minimum marriage age of girls from 16 to 18 years. He said that his bureau has a 24/7 helpline 1121 to lodge complaints of any child abuse including the early marriage incidents and teams at the bureau take swift action on such complaints.



A lawyer from Rawalpindi Ms Noreen Mumtaz Chattha also opposed the early marriages and said puberty or physical maturity was totally different from mental maturity and marriage of girls should be an act to get involved in after attaining complete mental maturity. She also highlighted the Islamic aspects of the marriage age and read out some verses from Surah Nisa of the Koran in support of her argument.

Population Welfare Officer Ms Sana Rehman from Chiniot also pointed out the exchange (watta Satta) and cousin marriages as menaces which the girls have to accept as their fate and demanded measures to check these trends. She said that early marriages were tantamount to crippling the society.



Ms Nabeela Aslam noted that frequency of early marriages was higher in the rural areas and in some pockets of the urban centers. She lauded Sindh for raising the minimum marriage age of girls from 16 to 18 years but regretted that the province was yet to implement the law effectively and swiftly. She revealed that some Sindhi people were showing up in Punjab districts bordering their areas for solemnizing early marriages. She said the Punjab government needs to pass the law regarding raising the girls marriage age to 18 years expeditiously to avoid becoming a tribal area for early marriage seekers.

At this point in the proceedings the participants were entertained and energized through awareness skits by PODA's Jugni Theatre group and pieces of poetry by some rural women leaders.



A PODA member and a rural woman leader from Lahore Ms Shamim Akhtar talked about the challenges she faces in the field while working against the child marriages trend. She told the participants that she works with women laborers and domestic workers in small villages on the outskirts of Lahore and these families marry their girls as young as 13 or 14 years what to talk of the 16 years. She said that PODA gave her training and confidence to raise her voice against the early marriages and she has managed to stop four such marriages in her area this year so far. Giving details she said she had to call in police twice on such occasions

and had to face the enraged families. She said even her house was fired upon in one such instance by some enraged party. She expressed her resolve to continue with her work no matter what challenges come her way or she has to face.

Members from the audience at this point were allowed to put up questions or express their views on the issue. Lawyer Ms Munazza Bukhari said that often young couples approach her and other lawyers in the district courts for court marriages and urged the need for counselling to stop such young couples. She said the computerized national identity cards (CNICs) of couples should be



declared mandatory for registering Nikkahs at Union Councils level and Nikkah Khwans, Nikkah Registrars, and UC secretaries should ensure it to stop early marriages.



A Rural Woman Leader Ms Samina Inayat from Mianwali said that early marriages were common in her area and Nikkah Khawans often in ignorance or for money get involved. She sought PODA support to strengthen ongoing efforts against such marriages in her area.



Ms Maryam Ranjha, a law student from Chowk Sarwar, District Kot Addu said that early marriages were equally harmful for both boys and girls and the awareness against the trend can be raised through promoting education. She said girls married young often face legal issues in case they have to secure their rights through courts due to lack of education.

A participant Nosheen Sajjad from District Jacobabad, Sindh said she comes from a remote rural area. “Earlier there used to be an impression that lack of girls’ education facilities, incidents of karo kari, and early marriages were rampant in her province but these issues are gradually dying down and the situation is improving. She said she was working in the field of education in her area and noted that girls’ enrolment in schools has increased there.



One of the speakers and a politician and MPA from Vehari Ms. Shameela Aslam in her address hoped that women sitting in the legislative assemblies will raise their voices in support of the demand to declare 15 October as the National Day of Rural Women in Pakistan. She said people should understand that rising population was squeezing resources and promoting poverty hence early marriages were the consequence. She also talked about the efforts to secure women’s rights to get family inheritance and property but regretted that such efforts often hit snags due lack of trends among women to get CNICs. She said

often women working as laborers and farmers marry their daughters young. She stressed the need for educating girls to equip them with tools for building a better future.

Ms Farah Jatoy, a rural woman participant from Thatta, who was attending the conference for the first time highlighted issues confronting women of her area and said “we have no water, no education, no health facility and our girls are married young.”





PARC official Mr Falak Naz said his organization was working in collaboration with PODA to equip rural and farmer women with formal and informal farming techniques in addition to building their knowledge of kitchen gardening, livestock farming, bee-keeping, fish farming etc.



Executive Director PODA, Ms Sameen Nazir, told the participants that her organization’s program to Reduce Early Marriages to Enhance Gender Equality, was being carried out in 41 districts of Punjab with funding by the Norwegian Embassy in Islamabad. She invited the Norwegian Ambassador Per Albert Ilsaas, who was also present among speakers, to address the audience.



Norway’s Ambassador to Pakistan H.E Per Albert Ilsaas said as a foreign diplomat in Islamabad he goes to lot of very boring meetings most of which are actually predominantly with men in attendance, but this is not one of those meetings. He said he has been the Norwegian ambassador in Pakistan for three years now and it’s a wonderful country to serve in as a foreign diplomat. But it is also apparent even to an outside observer that this is a country with some challenges. “I think that many of the challenges of Pakistan will stand a better chance of getting resolved more quickly and in a better way if the women of Pakistan participated more fully.”

He congratulated PODA and the rural women on the 17th annual leadership conference and said his main message would be that “the work that you do and PODA does is critically important. As society can only reach its full potential when both men and women, boys and girls participate fully. So I would encourage you all to continue being active raising your voices for real change.”



He said Norway has been a long standing advocate for women's right and gender equality on the global stage and in Pakistan. "We are committed to empowering individuals to make informed choices about their bodies and their lives. Our partnership with PODA on the project Reduce Early Marriages to Enhance Gender Equality exemplifies Norway's commitment to creating environments where girls can flourish and realize their potential," he added. He said gender equality is fundamental to human rights in societal progress. "Harmful practices like child marriage represents serious human rights violations. Ensuring gender equality means empowering young girls and women to make decisions about their bodies and reproductive health. Reproductive health rights are critical for their well-being and contribute to overall societal progress benefitting everybody including boys and men. The push to establish 18 as the minimum age of marriage is very important. It empowers girls and women to shape their own destinies and ensure that their rights are recognized and upheld."

He once again congratulated PODA and all the rural women participants for the important work they were doing, saying "you have the support and solidarity of Norway. And for me personally it's truly inspiring to witness the rural women coming together raising their voices and pressing their rights and the issue of gender equality and empowerment more generally."

In the end Deputy Speaker Balochistan Assembly Ms Ghazala Gola was invited to deliver a note of thanks. She requested PODA and the Norwegian Ambassador Ilsaas to launch programs for the betterment and education of girls and rural women in Balochistan districts as well. She said that our girls were talented and they should tread the path of development and progress together with their families.





Ms Sameena Nazir of PODA called the REMS team to the stage for a group photo with Ambassador H.E Ilsaas. Later the session speakers and stall holders at the conference were presented with commemorative shields and awards. The session concluded with a musical performance.



DAY - 3

Thursday, 24 October, 2024 from 10:00am - 1:00pm



Closing Plenary

اختتامی اجلاس



Co-funded by
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Closing Plenary

اختتامی اجلاس

An Interactive Dialogue on the Leadership Journey of Women with Dr. Riina Kionka, the Ambassador and Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Pakistan, and Ms. Marilina Armellin, the Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan, other guests.

The last or the closing session on the third day of the 17th Rural Women Leadership Training Conference at Lok Virsa on 24 October was an interactive dialogue on the leadership journey of women with Dr. Riina Kionka, the Ambassador and Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Pakistan, and Ms. Marilina Armellin, the Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan and other guests.



At this point Ms Sameena Nazir told the honorable guests for the session that about 30 stalls were set up on the sidelines of the conference which were displaying handicrafts, horticulture and organic food products and a plant clinic and the stall holders belonged to different districts across country like Hunza, Skardu, Tharparkar and South Punjab.



Ms. Sameena Nazir first invited Ms. Sosan Aziz, from Agha Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP), who addressed the guests and audience by saying that this event is a great opportunity to come together to learn, celebrate, create linkages. Regarding the program itself, she shared that it has been working in Gilgit and Chitral for the past 42 years for women empowerment. As a result, women now successfully run their own centers for example IT centers, business such as textile and food, and women are now equipped with community based saving, which helps them save up for basic needs. She said that projects in energy sector and for youth are also in progress with EU funding. She said 40 percent of the AKRSP work is focused on matters related to women and it has overall improved the situation with regard to women’s political and economic empowerment, their capacity building, skill development etc. She said we are also giving awareness regarding inheritance to property rights, and for the first time we have made a women empowerment policy for GB which also has strategic and action components and we would be seeking support and assistance from donors like UK, EU, and GIZ to implement it.

Later, Ms Sameena Nazir told the audience that the closing session is going to be an interactive session with the guests among whom were Dr. Riina Kionka, the Ambassador and Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Pakistan, and Ms. Marilina Armellin, the Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan. She welcomed them and invited them to the stage. She then added that we also have with us Ms Cristina Menegazzi from UNESCO. She also called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Ombudsperson to Prevent Workplace Harassment Ms Rakhshanda Naz to the stage.



Ms. Sameena Nazir now opened the session by asking the ambassadors to share opening remarks on PODA and the international day of women. Dr. Riina Kionka said it's a pleasure to be back at PODA. I remember this conference last year, and I remember dancing at the end and a lot of joyful encounters and a lot of excellent ideas and good pithy discussions with this group so it's a real pleasure and a privilege to be back here. She said these conferences have left her impressed and PODA is doing great work for women empowerment, a crucial part of the EU plan too. Interacting with the women and seeing them together, fighting for their own rights is a great sight to see. On the other hand, the Italian Ambassador Ms Armellin called it a very important conference saying "from what I have seen also outside it's a wonderful gathering for us all. Time to share, share thoughts, to share best practices, to share what we have in common, to have a better life in the future. I think that this kind of conferences are very important and as you know the 15th October was declared the International Rural Women's Day exactly for this purpose. So we are proud as Italy to be supporting this process with our presence here and I look forward to meeting all of you afterwards.



The Ambassadors were also asked about their current time in Pakistan and what it means to be an ambassador. Ms. Marilina shared it is a great honor to represent her country in Pakistan and that she specially requested to be assigned to Asia. Pakistan is a very warm and hospitable country and the welcome she had here, made her feel like a princess! She said that she will be now working to enhance bilateral ties in the fields of culture, development cooperation, besides discussing projects that we might do with PODA, and of course commercial, economic and last but not least political. Dr. Riina expressed that she represents 27 countries and its part of her duty to gather up the work these 27 countries do in this country as team Europe. For the European Union, women rights are human rights. Working for them is important and a privilege. She said one third of all of Pakistan's exports come to the European Union through a program that is called GSP Plus, you have probably hears of it, it's a trade scheme by which Pakistan agrees to fulfill and implement 27 international conventions on things like human rights, environment, governance, and in return Pakistan gets to send its exports to the EU either duty free or with very low duties. Why am I talking about this? It's because among those obligations that Pakistan has taken on are a number of human rights obligations that touch directly upon you. The touch upon women because human rights are also women's rights and women's rights are human rights, and those are the one and the same.

Ms. Sameena then welcomed Mr Zubair from the Canadian High Commission, Ms. Asiya Arif, the Executive Director of SPARC, Ms. Ayesha Tasleem, PODA's board member.

Ms. Sameena resumed the dialogue between the ambassadors, by asking how growing up in Europe was for them. Ms. Marilina shared her earlier years in Italy are a cherished memory, with little to no pressure. She was nurtured and her skills were developed. Her childhood dream was to become a diplomat,



developing negotiating, empathy for cultures and people. She entered her diplomatic career in 1996, only two were female, including Madam Ambassador but there has been progress in Italy, even in the rural communities but still a lot to be done. Dr. Riina Kionka shared she was a troublemaker, all the girls would take up cooking and sewing, but she wanted to learn how to work with wood and metal, classes which the boys wanted to take. A few years later, as she recalled, her school did not have a girls' track team, and she successfully got one made. It taught me a couple of things, one was keeping your nose to the grind and never giving up to your goals and the other was you can get a lot more done if you do it in a group with others who are interested in doing the same thing.



Next, Ms Dilshad Bano, Minister for Women Development and Social Welfare, Gilgit-Baltistan joined us. Mr Constantino Parma, international project coordinator, Olive Culture, Government of Italy also marked his presence at the conference.

The Q and A session was resumed, opening up by asking the ambassadors if they faced any discrimination in their careers, and how they tackled it. Ms Marilina shared how at the beginning, when she joined her career, women population was very less as compared to the dominant male counterparts. A sense of patronizing style in diplomacy was felt. The most blatant discrimination was when after her children were born, she was awaiting her promotion, but found herself at the bottom of the list.

The EU ambassador shared that she was the first woman in many of her positions, first political director, first ambassador of Estonia to Germany, first Human Rights representative for the EU. There must've been discrimination along the way which she did not notice but as a woman, one has to work almost ten times as hard to prove herself. The scenario is changing the EU is trying to help this change as well. The programs which the EU funds in the country, gender equality is at heart. She shared her husband is also in the diplomatic field and his support is the strength she needed, and now for the last two postings, he has pulled back and is accompanying her currently.



Ms Fayaz Kausar, from the district of Mardan, asked the honorable ambassadors a question, chairperson of the Woman Voice Organization. She asked how their experience in Pakistan has been so far and what work can be done for the women here. The ambassadors said it is a delight, the hospitality and love of the people makes them feel at home. Gatherings as such are very important and great, women have come out to create a dialogue and change. The project such as Olive Culture, it is great to see women are creating products, such as cosmetics and skincare from olives, and selling them, there is great potential of the women here. It is necessary to empower them further.

Ms Sameena also invited Lehar Mirza on the stage to join them. Ms. Lehar Mirza is a woman transgender leader, working for the protection of women. PODA Team played a documentary on the background and story of the song ‘Bella Ciao,’ which was a voice of freedom for the Italian farmers, 200 years back.



Ms Zainab Sakhawat, from Sukkur, Sindh, asked Dr. Kionka about her love for music and playing the trumpet, to which the ambassador replied, she started playing the trumpet at the age of 10. She was inspired by Louis Armstrong, and realized that’s the instrument for her. Music is the way to people’s hearts.

Ms Marilina recalled, she played the piano at an early age but due to her work schedule, she could not continue it. However, music is a uniting force and brings us together. The Italian embassy is establishing a compound in Islamabad which will have Islamabad’s largest theater and it will help bring people together.

A woman from the audience asked about the EU policy on Palestine, and how it plans to aid the women there. Dr. Kionka expressed that the EU has been the biggest funder of the Palestinian authority. We conducted and have kept it afloat. The EU is horrified by the current situation in Gaza, and we continue to send humanitarian assistance.

The audience and PODA Team bid farewell to the ambassador with a shield and a gift from PODA. Director UNESCO to Pakistan, Ms Cristina Menegazzi who graced the conference also addressed the audience. Appreciating and honoring the Annual Rural Women Leadership and Training Conference along with the different cultures of Pakistan she requested to take a picture with the audience too! She expressed that women transmit culture. She urged women to fight for themselves, stand up for themselves and all the life and colors in Pakistan are with them.

Next, Ms Asiya, the Executive Director of SPARC, appreciated Ms Sameena for her efforts to bring women from all over Pakistan under one roof, addressing all their challenges and working towards a resolution. She also shared that a large number of women in Pakistan suffer from anemia. She requested the ministers and relevant stakeholders to take this fact into account and work with relevant parties for a solution and pay attention to the nutrition issues among women.



Ms Lehar Mirza shared her thoughts too. She works as a Victim Support Officer in Punjab. Our women are very strong and they should stop being scared and hesitant. She titled all the women as ‘Heroes.’ She thanked Ms Sameena for her efforts on creating a network for the women, a platform to raise their voices and urged the women to educate and aware the women and girls in their own areas.

Trade union leader Ms Mehak Butt was called to address the women and she urged the participants to make the lessons learnt here at the PODA conference part of their lives and share those lessons with other women in their areas when they go back. She urged the women to always raise their voices against oppression wherever they see it.



Ms Rukhshanda Naz, legal women rights advocate in Pakistan and Provincial Ombudsperson to prevent workplace harassment in KP was invited to address the audience. She started by appreciating the rural women constituency created by Ms Sameena over the past 17 years. The conference has much more than cultural diversity, we get to see the minorities and other marginalized communities too. The advocacy being done by PODA takes great effort and should be done on the state level too. She called the women leaders, in their respective areas and this resolution should be passed to the state too to implement them. Despite all the challenges, PODA and the women present have come together to have discussions on topics which matter, and this passion is really commendable. She said amid rising religious extremism the space for women is shrinking. She expressed concern that cases of sexual harassment mostly go unreported due to social and family pressures. She asked the rural women leaders to draft a strongly worded the conference resolution and give it to her which she will be sending with her covering letter to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister and other concerned officials.

Dr. Tanvir Kayani, posed the following question, opening the Q&A session. As there are many legislations and harassment committees, what is the output of these committees? Men serve and chair these committees. She went on to add that she had served in the government sector for about 35 years, whenever there used to be an issue, being a woman, when she asked about any updates, they would say it's in progress, but saving and defending men is important. She also requested Ms. Samina Alvi, the then First Lady of Pakistan, that all the committees created, should be headed by women, as they have to take their rights, which the men suppress. Dr. Kayani recalled questioning Dr. Sania Nishtar, that being the most senior woman, why she couldn't be a part of such legislations and committees. So she said all such committees should be headed by the women.



Ms Rukhshanda Naz, responded saying the issue that has been raised here is crucial and should be worked upon. She said in KP at least, we have tried to give women representation in such committees and that too at appropriate positions. She said a percentage of committee head positions can be given to women but it cannot be restricted that only women should head these committees. She also said these committees in the departments not only lack capacity but also commitment



Ms Bushra Tabassum from AJK asked Leher Mirza that she was trying to fill in social protection forms but noted that the transgender were hesitant to come into contact with us and were not willing to talk to us why is it so?



Ms Irum Khaliq from Karachi suggested that girls should be provided skill development opportunities at schools.



Ms Nasirah Tanoli from Mansehra said she has two demands one is that local government elections were held in the province about three years ago but these governments remain frozen the authorities should be asked to make these governments fully functional so that people's problems could be resolved at the grassroots level secondly she said women in here area were quite skilled and needed to market and sell their products

so the KP government should set up women markets to sell their handicrafts and products.



Advocate Ms Fatima Halepoto from Sindh raised the issues related to implementation of laws such as early marriages or gender-based violence etc. She also demanded rural women and parliamentarians representation at the GBV committees.



Ms Asifa Jamali from Naseerabad Balochistan asked all the local and international organizations to focus their work on tackling climate change and provide climate change awareness to rural women in their local languages.



Ms Fatima Mengal from District Kalat, Balochistan said that decisions on divorce cases in her area take too long and sometimes women get killed before the decision so decisions on divorce cases in family courts should be expedited



Ms Fizza Kanwal, journalist, activist, and paralegal from Quetta drawn attention of the conference participants to the absence or lack of forensic labs in Balochistan which was affecting the investigations of rape cases negatively. She also pointed out that the whole country has seen rise in honor killings since early nineties and only Balochistan has witnessed a 13 percent increase in such cases and the government should take stricter measures to curb the trend.



Ms Yasmin Khakwani from Civil Development Organization Multan demanded the government should declare October 15 and the national day of the rural women in line with the International Rural Women Day on the same date.

Ms Aqsa Mirwani from District Awaran, Balochistan said the rural women in the far-off areas like her district need to be reached out door-to-door and given the message of empowerment and change in addition to development at this point Ms Nazir said she should reach out to them and PODA will stand behind her in this effort. She should take lead in the initiative.



Ms Khandana from District Swabi KP asked Ms Rukhshanda Naz that why decisions on cases of women's right to inherit property take too long despite the fact that shariah allows this right.

Hoorab Deen from Sialkot, Punjab demanded special committees assisting the resolution of kidnappings cases of minorities' girls.



Ms Amtul Aleem Farooqi from Malir, Karachi suggested ban on employment of kids under 15 at hotels and restaurants along roadside to protect them from child sexual abuse.

Ms Shamim Akhtar from Lahore demanded legal protection for girls and women working as domestic helpers.



Ms Ejaz Farzana Lali from District Chiniot, Punjab demanded establishment of a woman market in Punjab on the pattern of Balochistan in addition she demanded that girls schools should dedicate one exclusive period for self-defense training of girls. She suggested inclusion of women members in district disaster management committees. Secondly, long-term measures on government level for economic empowerment and survival and independence of divorced women.



Ms Nuzhat Yasim from Layyah, South Punjab demanded that provision of cheap internet access in rural areas and villages to materialized the idea of digitalization and digital education of rural women.



Ms Aqeela Naz and other rural women from different districts were invited to read out selected points of the 17th Rural Women Leadership Training Conference Resolution loud to the audience and get those approved from them.

Ms Dilshad Bano addressed the audience before conclusion of the session. She appreciated and applauded the event. She stated that knowing one’s rights is important. In regards to the resolution, she said she fully supports it as it supports women’s rights and regards every challenges women face. She said women will have to be the bridge between the government and the resolution, to implement it. She reinforced that it is important for women and girls to have some sort of talent such as stitching or embroidery, as they will be financially independent. In GB, she stated that, they have opened resources center for women, where they cater cooking, freelancing, stitching, empowering women to open their businesses, receive orders. They have trainers, who are fully equipped. Everyone has their own system and mindsets, especially in politics but it is important they work for the women of Pakistan, as it will benefit them and the economy in the long-term.





Suggestions for the Conference Resolution

Women who were attending from all over Pakistan also presented their suggestions in writing for the resolution as stated below:

- The atrocities and bloodshed against women and children and all individuals including journalists and UN staff in Palestine should end immediately and Israel should observe a ceasefire in the area to facilitate relief activities.
- Political parties should educate and sensitize their male workers about women's rights and pertinent laws and ask them to facilitate and support women's rights activists in rural areas instead of obstructing them.
- Political parties should also help and support the politically active rural women and sensitize their workers not to tease or harass the women belonging to other political parties.
- Women farmers should be given representation as councilors at UC, Tehsil, district and higher levels.
- Boys and girls should be provided counseling and awareness sessions from class 6th and above about harms of early marriages particularly on the education and health of girls.
- Women domestic workers should also be invited to attend the next rural women leadership training conference as they are also the backbone of the economy.
- The mental health of the rural women should also be focused and worked upon.
- The girls' education and its development needs to be worked upon particularly in the backward areas of lower Punjab as these areas lack proper educational facilities and faculty.
- Special attention should be given to women and girls' self-defense and they should be provided physical and self-defense training facilities at school and colleges so that they can protect themselves when needed.
- Women entrepreneurs, particularly rural women should be provided specialized business trainings in their local languages. PODA can extend cooperation in arranging these training and internships for these women.
- Rural women particularly those working as farmers should be provided special trainings regarding climate change issues and its impact on agriculture.
- Small businesses trainings like sewing and beautician courses should be arranged for rural women entrepreneurs.
- Women and girls should be the axis of flood relief activities whenever the floods come as they suffer the most.
- The process of issuance of CNICs and other legal documents to women should be made easy.
- The cultural and literary activities focusing on local languages should be promoted and schools should also adopt these languages as medium of instruction to impart education to rural women and girls.

In the end an award ceremony was scheduled for the stalls holders, which had been present since day-one of the event. This was followed by photo sessions with the audience and a special PODA staff group photo. The participants then engaged in folk dances and music along with lunch before dispersal.





17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference

Data Analysis

Organized by

Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA)
at Islamabad - Pakistan from 22 to 24 October, 2024

Data Analysis

A total of 2,376 participants attended PODA's 2024 conference over three days, of which 1,939 were women, 436 were men, and 1 was transgender.

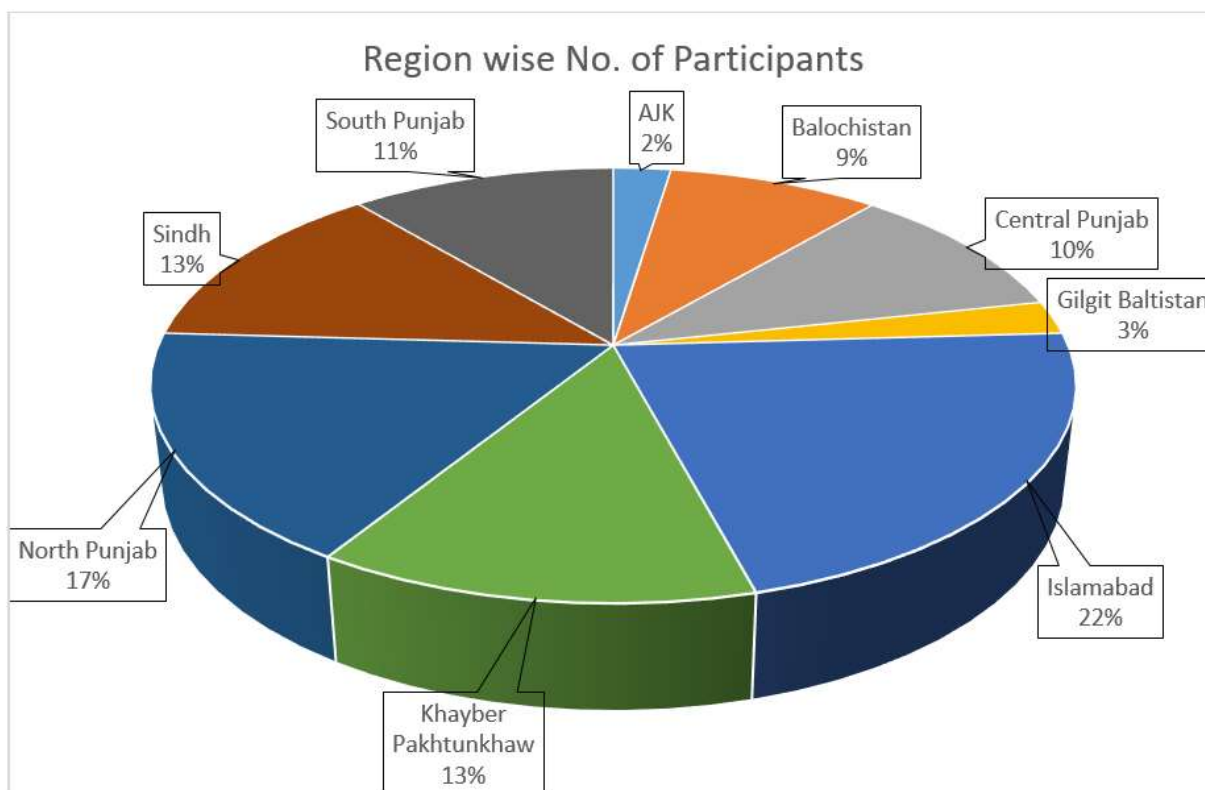
A total of 17 persons with disabilities (PWDs), including 15 women and 2 men, and 50 persons from minorities (including 37 women and 13 men) were among the diverse participants.

As Punjab has the largest population in Pakistan its overall representation was 38% (Central Punjab = 10%, North Punjab = 17%, South Punjab = 11%) in the conference, 13% participants were from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 13% participants were from Sindh, 22% from Islamabad, 03% from Gilgit Baltistan, 09% from Balochistan. The participants from AJK region were 02%.

Region Wise Number of Participants

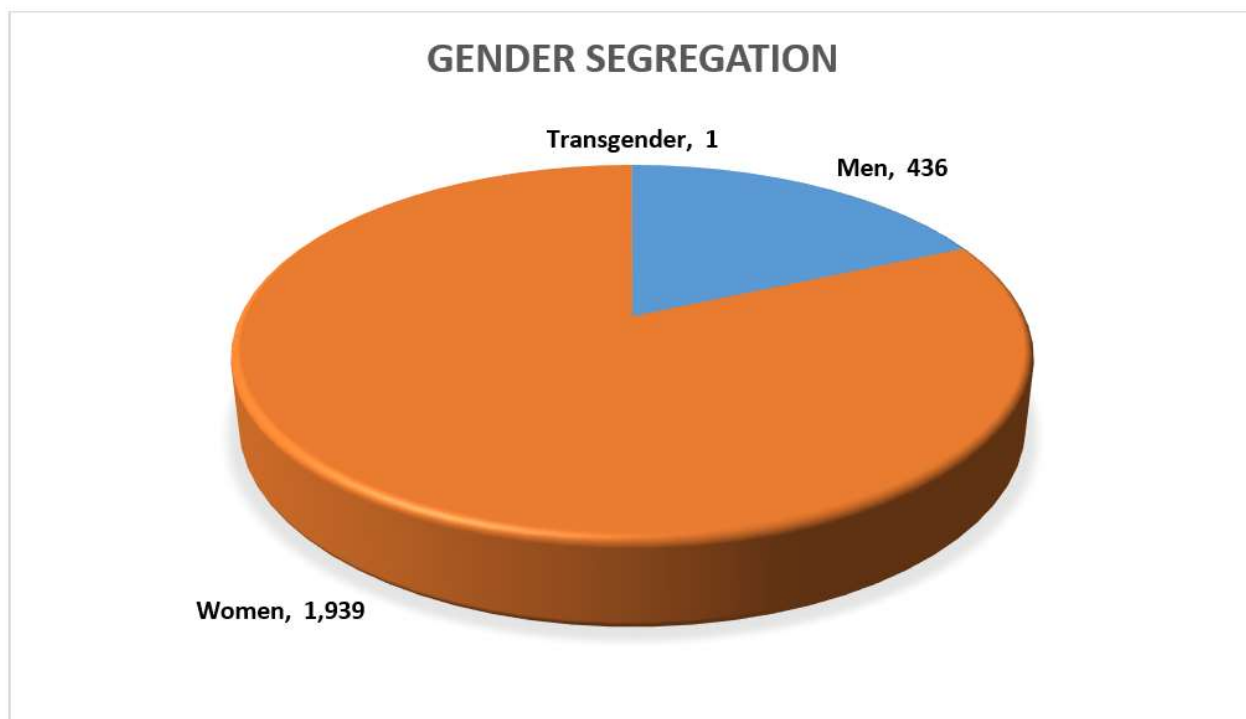
A total of 2,376 participants attended PODA's 2024 conference over three days, of which 1,939 were women, 436 were men, and 1 was transgender. A total of 17 persons with disabilities (PWDs), including 15 women and 2 men, and 50 persons from minorities (including 37 women and 13 men) were among the diverse participants.

Province	No. of Districts Participated	Total Participants	Male	Female	Transgender	PWD	Minorities
AJK	5	57	11	46	0	1	0
Balochistan	26	210	19	191	0	0	2
Gilgit Baltistan	6	59	16	43	0	0	0
Islamabad	1	517	142	375	0	0	15
Khayber Pakhtunkhaw	24	309	61	248	0	3	10
Punjab	39	915	145	769	1	4	23
Sindh	29	309	42	267	0	10	15
Total	130	2376	436	1939	1	18	65



Gender Segregated Data

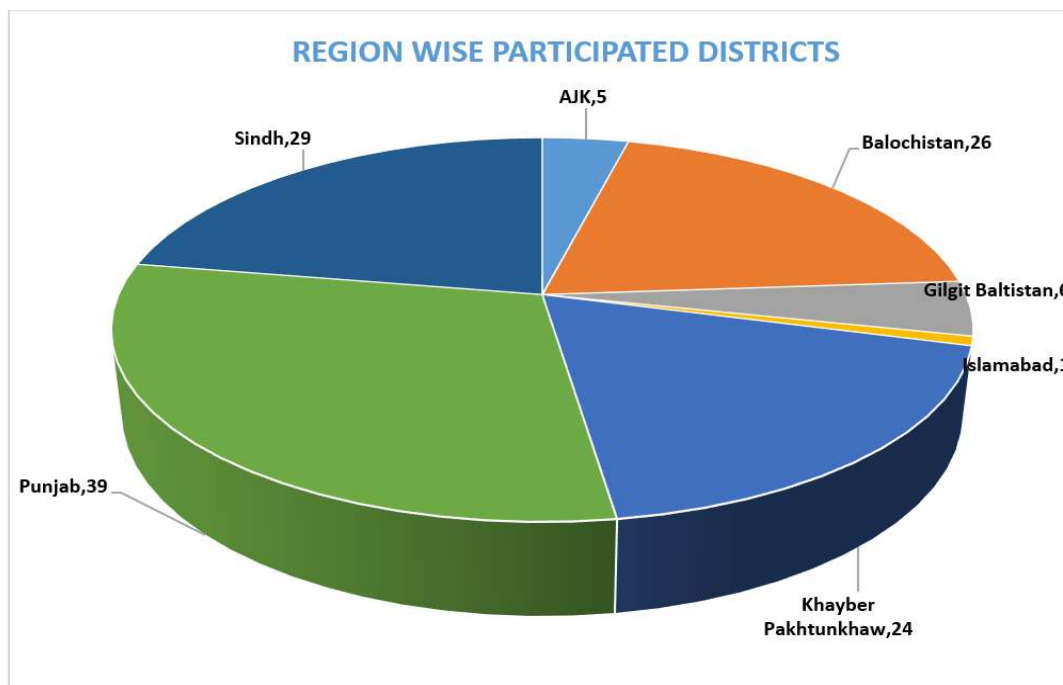
Total 2,376 persons attended the conference from overall country. Out of 2,376 there were total 1,939 were women that is 80% of total participation of all three days of the conference.





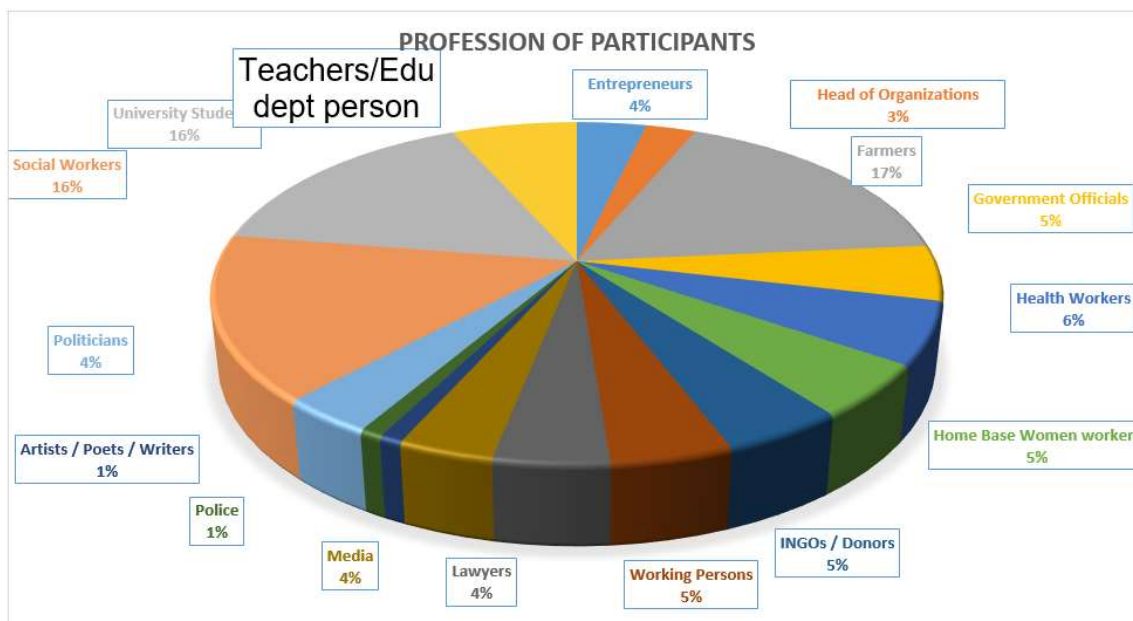
Geographic Spread of Participants

Leadership Conference organized by PODA. From AJK Out of the 10 districts in the region, representatives from 5 districts were present. From Balochistan, 26 districts participated out of a total of 36, while 6 districts from Gilgit-Baltistan were represented out of 14. In Punjab, 39 districts took part, and Islamabad contributed 1 district. Additionally, 24 districts from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa participated out of 38, and 29 districts from Sindh joined out of 30. In total, 130 districts participated from across Pakistan, representing 170 districts in the country. Geographically, this accounted for 83% of Pakistan's total area.



Professional Diversity of Participants

The below graph depicts the professional diversity of participants of 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference 2024 by PODA Pakistan.





Financial Report

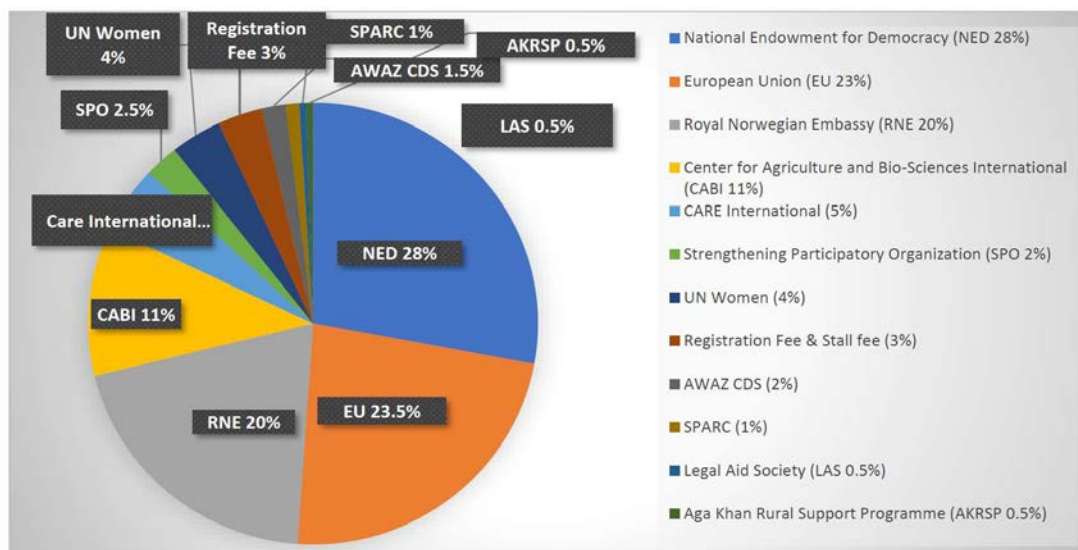
Overall Participants Summary				
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Total
Total Number of participants	755	754	780	2289
Female	668	631	630	1929
Male	87	123	150	360
Districts	129	125	130	

PWD	TGs	Minority
15	3	25

Total Per participant Cost: PKR 35,733

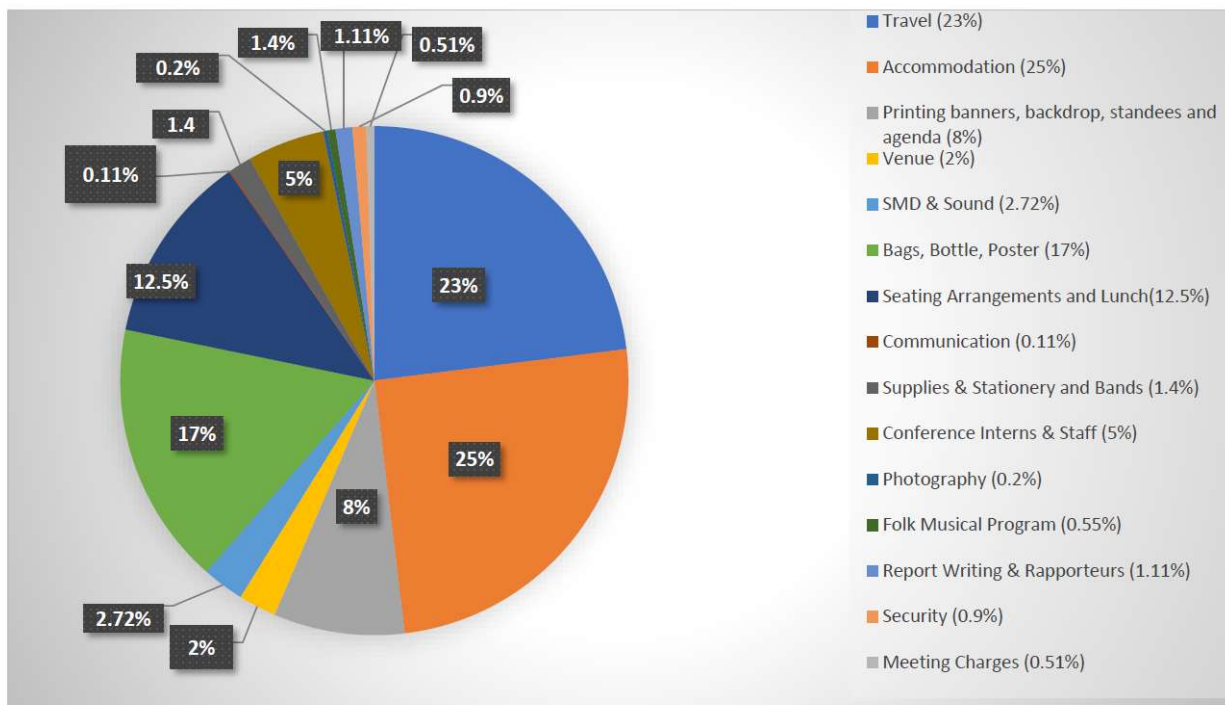
Per Day Per Participant Cost: PKR 11,911

Conference Income Report		
S. No.	Donors	Amount
1	National Endowment for Democracy (NED)	57,00,000
2	European Union (EU)	4,727,500
3	Royal Norwegian Embassy (RNE)	4,100,000
4	Center for Agriculture and bio-Sciences International (CABI)	2,220,800
5	CARE International	1,000,000
6	Strengthening Participatory Organization (SPO)	500,000
7	UN Women	750,000
8	Registration Fee & Stall Fee	656,725
9	AWAZ CDS	350,000
10	SPARC	200,000
11	Legal Aid Society (LAS)	100,000
12	Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP)	100,000
Total		20,405,025





PODA Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference 2024 Expenditure Report		
S.No	Expense Details	Actual Expenditure in PKR
1	Travel	6,506,459
2	Accommodation	7,083,132
3	Printing banners, backdrop, standees and agenda	2,355,513
4	Venue	680,000
5	SMD & Sound	750,000
6	Bags, Bottle, Poster	4,727,500
7	Seating Arrangements and Lunch	3,418,088
8	Communication	29,200
9	Supplies & Stationery and Bands	404,250
10	Conference Interns & Staff	1,390,012
11	Photography	70,000
12	Folk Musical Program	150,000
13	Report Writing & Rapporteurs	302,000
14	Security	245,340
15	Meeting Charges	145,000
Total		27,264,482



Resolution Adopted on 24th October, 2024

Preamble:

The 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference, organized by PODA from 22 to 24 October, 2024 gathered 2250 rural women leaders from 130 districts across Pakistan, including (Azad Jammu & Kashmir), (Gilgit-Baltistan), (Balochistan), (Punjab), (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), (Sindh), and (Islamabad). Conference delegates included women farmers, lady health workers, teachers, doctors, nurses, journalists, legislators, councilors, lawyers, government officials, writers, artists, poets, businesswomen, students, artisans and heads of local and national organizations. The conference provided a unique platform for rural women to voice their shared challenges and solution strategies and shared united efforts to advocate for their rights. In addition, participants called for urgent action to stop violence against women and children in all areas and also demanded protection of civilian's women and children in Palestine and demanded immediate ceasefire.

After 3 days of deliberations, the participants unanimously approved the following recommendations:

1. **Recognized women working in agriculture sector as “FARMERS” at par with male farmers so the women farmers can get agricultural sector subsidies, crop insurance, loans and services.**

- o Demand the issuance of social security cards, health cards, and old-age benefits cards for rural women laborers.
- o Ensure farm fields are recognized as workplaces and provide women farmers with protection under anti-harassment laws.
- o Access to land ownership and inheritance transfers.
- o Allot government-owned lands to landless women farmers for crop production.
- o Develop implementation mechanisms for Sindh Women Agricultural Workers Act 2019 and expand similar laws to other provinces in Pakistan.
- o Enhance rural women's climate resilience by providing training in sustainable agricultural practices
- o Provide training to empower women on climate smart technologies to mitigate droughts and flood impacts.
- o Include rural women leaders in climate action planning at local, provincial, and national levels
- o Provide climate-protection knowledge in schools in both national and native languages.

2. **Political Inclusion and Decision-Making:**

- o Ensure 50% representation of women in the local government system
- o Reactivate the system in all provinces, and expedite local elections in Punjab.
- o Increase women's participation to 50% in district-level peace, voter education, and women's protection committees.
- o Call on NADRA to facilitate birth registration, issuance of Form B, and CNICs for women and girls at the Union Council level to facilities easy access to legal identity documentation.
- o Revise census terminology from “mardam shumari” (headcount of men) to “insan shumari” (human count) to ensure gender sensitive language and include 50% female staff in census administration.
- o Political parties shared include women in decision-making posts at high level of party posts.
- o Political parties should educate their workers about pro-women laws passed by parliament of Pakistan.

3. **Education and Health:**

- o Ensure access to middle and high schools after primary school for rural girls and free education beyond matriculation
- o Ensure Inclusion of digital literacy, electricity, and internet facilities for rural women in all regions.



- o Facilitate rural arts for technical and vocational training in electronics, electrical repair, and solar technology to create employment opportunities for women.
- o Promote adolescent girls' reproductive health awareness in schools, especially regarding nutrition and hygiene.
- o Provide facilities for sports, self-defense training and daily exercise to support rural women's physical and mental health.
- o Provide washrooms and water in girls middle and high schools in all parts of Pakistan.
- o Increase high school education to 12 classes so girls complete high school education by age 18 not 16 years.

4. Preventing Child Marriage and Gender-Based Violence:

- o The minimum marriage age for girls be set at 18 in all parts of Pakistan following the legislation in Sindh.
- o Provision of CNIC (Computerized National Identity Card) should be mandatory for bride and groom both before Nikah.
- o Police should conduct community sessions to create awareness about laws to prevent child abuse, gender based violence and domestic violence.
- o Government should set-up Violence Against Women Prevention Center at Union Council level with equal member of women and man as volunteers to meet monthly.
- o Shelter homes and support centers for women survivors of violence should be setup at tehsil level.
- o Appoint Woman as marriage registrars and provide training to officiants on accurate completion of marriage contracts and relevant legal requirements.
- o Train law enforcement officials in women's rights to improve investigation practices in cases of gender-based crimes and reduce violence against women and girls to investigate cases with victim centered approach.

5. Economic Development:

- o Facilitate rural students to learn technical entrepreneurship skills during age 16 to 18 to help females become economically independently.
- o Establish business support centers for skilled women farmers in each district to market traditional products, provide interest-free loans on easy terms, and offer guidance on online business development.

Conclusion:

We, the rural women leaders, members of parliament, and civil society organizations, reaffirm our commitment to advancing rural women's rights and empowerment through education, action and policy reforms. We call on the government, legislators, national institutions, national and international organizations, UN agencies, research institution, provincial commissions on the status of women, international partners, media, and supporters of rural women to collaborate with us to ensure rural women achieve recognition, protection, and the opportunities necessary to fully contribute to Pakistan's progress.

For more information, please contact

Ms. Naheeda Abbasi at rwln-pakistan@poda.org.pk or at +92 333 578 5278.



Stalls Report



Stalls Report

Event Overview:

On the sidelines of the 17th Annual PODA Rural Women Leadership Conference at the Lok Virsa, Islamabad, October 22-24, 2024 nearly 30 stalls were set up which showcased traditional crafts, organic products, and educational materials. This feature of the conference was meant to emphasize women’s entrepreneurship and the value of local artisanship. The event was inaugurated by Ms. Samina Fazil, President of the Islamabad Chamber of Commerce, and attended by notable figures including Miss Romina Khurshid Alam, Coordinator to Prime Minister on Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, and Miss Farah Naz, Parliamentary Secretary from the National Heritage and Cultural Division. Ambassadors and other dignitaries including Ms. Marilina Armellin from Italy, also visited the stalls.



Highlights:

These stalls highlighted handmade items and organic foods, providing a platform for women entrepreneurs to display their talent and creativity while raising awareness about sustainable practices.



Additionally, educational stalls from organizations such as PCRWR, CARE International, and CABI International's Plant Clinic offered insights on water management, community development, and plant health. A stall by the Red Crescent, set up in response to the current health emergency, provided health awareness and information about available services.



Conclusion:

The stalls underscored Pakistan's rich cultural heritage and demonstrated the potential for sustainable development through local crafts and organic products. The event fostered connections among artisans, attendees, and stakeholders, promoting traditional crafts as a pathway to economic empowerment and sustainable living.

Stall Summaries:

- 1. Bushra Asif (Kohat, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa)**
Bushra Asif's stall featured a range of handmade woolen clothes, shawls, and jackets, showcasing the skills of women and young girls from her vocational center in Kohat. The stall highlighted the hard work and talent behind these unique handicrafts.
- 2. CABI Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International**
CABI's stall focused on educating visitors about plant diseases like Parthenium. Through brochures, posters, and hands-on displays, they provided valuable information on plant care, pest control, and disease management.
- 3. Ms. Tougeer Fatima (Lahore, Punjab)**
Ms. Fatima's stall displayed vibrant handmade woven rugs and baskets, emphasizing traditional weaving methods and colorful clay and handmade paintings. The colorful display attracted many, particularly families and children.
- 4. Ms. Fatima Noor (Awaran, Baluchistan)**
Ms. Noor's stall showcased paintings and resin art reflecting her deep cultural heritage. The intricate designs and vibrant colors demonstrated her creativity and connection to her traditions, drawing appreciation from visitors.
- 5. Ms. Nargis Shaheen (Islamabad, Punjab)**
Ms. Shaheen's stall featured wool garments, embroidered bed sheets, and shawls, all made with care and traditional craftsmanship. The items were stylish, warm, and functional, appealing to visitors for their beauty and utility.
- 6. Ms. Kiran Peter (Rawalpindi, Punjab)**
Ms. Peter's stall displayed night suits, ladies' tops, and glass lids created by young girls learning sewing at her vocational center. The collection emphasized the girls' creativity and craftsmanship, offering them a platform to showcase their work.
- 7. Ms. Zainab Bibi (Chakwal, Punjab)**
Ms. Zainab's stall highlighted a variety of organic products, including lentils, beans, and chickpeas, grown without chemical fertilizers or pesticides. The focus on organic farming and sustainability



attracted health-conscious visitors.

8. Ms. Hafeeza (Chakwal, Punjab)

Ms. Hafeeza's eco-friendly stall featured handmade products like toys, jewelry, and paper recycling items created from waste materials. The creative use of recycled materials showcased sustainable craftsmanship and environmental awareness, drawing interest from eco-conscious attendees.

9. PODA Olive Value Addition Products - Ms. Mehmoona Saher (Chakwal, Punjab)

Ms. Mehmoona Saher displayed a variety of olive-based products, including tea, soaps, cosmetics, and pickles, emphasizing the health benefits and versatility of olives.

10. Ghaniya Arts - Sana Usman (Lahore, Punjab)

Sana Usman presented Sufi-inspired paintings, handmade candles, body mists, and waxes, blending cultural and spiritual themes with products that promote relaxation and well-being.

11. Crafts by Meesal - Ms. Meesal Zeshan (Lahore, Punjab)

Ms. Meesal Zeshan showcased eco-friendly handicrafts made from recycled materials, including wooden bangles and jewelry, promoting sustainability and creativity.

12. Avocado By-products - Sana Asghar (Murree, Punjab)

Sana Asghar's stall featured avocado-based biscuits, jams, pickles, and free tastings of avocado tea and biscuits, promoting the health benefits of the fruit.

13. PCRWR Educational Stall - Ms. Bareerah Fatima (Islamabad, Punjab)

Ms. Bareerah Fatima's stall, in collaboration with PCRWR, offered educational resources on climate-resilient farming practices, helping farmers adapt to climate change.

14. SPARC Handicrafts - Ms. Shaista (Rawalpindi, Punjab)

Ms. Shaista displayed handmade products, including bags and cushions, created by girls at SPARC's vocational center, supporting skill development and empowerment.

15. Aru's Food - Ms. Arjuman (Skardu, Gilgit Baltistan) & K2 Food – Ms. Zakia (Baltistan, Gilgit Baltistan)

Ms. Arjuman and Ms. Zakia showcased local health foods and dry fruits from Skardu, highlighting the region's unique culinary traditions and promoting the health benefits of local produce.

16. Traditional Baskets Center - Ms. Fatima Arzoo (Ghanche, Gilgit Baltistan)

Ms. Fatima Arzoo's eco-friendly stall featured handmade baskets, hotpots, lampshades, and handbags, emphasizing sustainability and local craftsmanship.

17. Minsa Gemstones - Nasreen Abbas (Ghanche, Gilgit Baltistan)

Nasreen Abbas showcased a stunning collection of real gemstones and handmade jewelry, combining traditional craftsmanship with modern designs, emphasizing the cultural significance of local artisans.



18. **Mishal Traditional Shawl Center - Ms. Yasmeen Wali & Ms. Maryam (Skardu, Gilgit Baltistan)**
Ms. Yasmeen Wali and Ms. Maryam presented traditional shawls and dresses featuring vibrant patterns and colors, promoting Skardu's cultural heritage and local fashion.
19. **Urban Trees – Ms. Gulrukh (Lahore, Punjab)**
Ms. Gulrukh displayed organic handmade products such as soaps, lip balms, candles, and cosmetics, all made from natural ingredients, encouraging eco-friendly choices.
20. **Rural Women Development Center - Ms. Raheela Bano (Kasur, Punjab)**
Ms. Raheela Bano's stall featured handmade dolls, strollers, and other crafts, supporting local artisans and promoting the rich traditions of her region.
21. **Red Crescent - Mr. Mehmood (Islamabad, Punjab)**
Mr. Mehmood educated visitors on first aid techniques and provided ambulance services, raising awareness about health and safety.
22. **Olive Culture – Ms. Aimen Nazir (Islamabad, Punjab)**
Ms. Aimen Nazir showcased olive-based products and educational materials about olive farming, promoting the benefits of olives for health and beauty.
23. **Five Stalls of CARE International - Ms. Rabiya (Islamabad, Punjab)**
Ms. Rabiya featured educational materials and handmade products from women beneficiaries of CARE International's empowerment programs, promoting community support and women's entrepreneurship.
24. **Kalash Handicrafts – Ms. Nisa (Chitral, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)**
Ms. Nisa displayed Kalash cultural handicrafts, including traditional black dresses and beaded caps, celebrating the unique heritage and craftsmanship of the Kalash people.

Stalls Pictures





Rural women leaders unite to tackle gender inequality

Myra Imran

Islamabad

Valuable discussion on issues faced by rural women, pledges for a brighter future, cultural performances, inspiring speeches and emotional good byes marked the conclusion of the three-day Annual Rural Women Conference on Thursday.

During the concluding ceremony of the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference organised by PODA, Dr. Riina Kionka, the European Union Ambassador to Pakistan, announced a new €4 million project aimed at enhancing gender equality and supporting women's political leadership in Pakistan.

The initiative will focus on developing various aspects of leadership skills. In response to a question, she remarked, "After spending three years in Pakistan, I can now represent Pakistan on different EU platforms." The EU Ambassador re-affirmed the representative women leaders that all EU projects are developed and designed to ensure 100 per cent gender equality.

The EU Ambassador, Dr. Riina Kionka, commended the women who are true 'troublemakers' in a positive tone, emphasizing the importance of questioning the status quo and pushing boundaries. She highlighted their resilience in challenging out-



ISLAMABAD: Closing ceremony of 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference. — Online

dated norms, which drives meaningful change in the world. By pursuing their own aspirations, these women leaders empower others to do the same, fostering a more inclusive and cohesive society, she added. Sharing insights from their youth, both Dr. Kionka and Marilina Armellini, the Italian Ambassador to Pakistan, addressed the women leaders representing approximately 130 districts across four provinces, as well as AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan. They discussed their experiences with stereotypical mindsets in their respective countries, highlighting how

they overcame these challenges through determination and resilience.

Emphasizing the urgent need to tackle gender-based inequalities worldwide, the Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan, assured the women leaders that half of the beneficiaries of their projects would be women. She noted that Italy is making significant strides in championing human rights. Reflecting on her childhood, she shared that even as a second-grade student, she was an effective negotiator, advocating for her classmates with the school administration. "I have two sons, and

they have been taught to respect and empower women, as there is a pressing need to address the inequalities around us," she added.

Rakhshanda Naz, ombudsman for workplace Harassment Prevention, KP said amid rising religious extremism the space for women is shrinking. She expressed concern that cases of sexual harassment mostly go unreported due to social and family pressures. She asked the rural women leaders to draft a strongly worded conference resolution and give it to her which she will be sending with her covering

letter to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister and other concerned officials. The women leaders present at the concluding ceremony gave standing ovation to ED-PODA Sameena Nazir for her untiring efforts to make the conference as successful event which allows women to interact with those who represent almost all districts of Pakistan. "We must continue to support and uplift these trailblazers as they lead the way toward a brighter future for all," she said in her concluding remarks.

Other speakers included Dilshad Bano, Minister of Social Welfare and Women Development; Rukhsana Parveen, from Legal Aid Society, Sindh; Asia Arif, Executive Director, SPARC; Christina, Director, Unesco, Pakistan; Lehar Mirza, (from transgender community) Tahafuz Markaz, Rawalpindi; and Mehak Butt, Home based workers, Multan. During a special session on the women's rights to inheritance, Rukhsana Parveen Khokhar from Legal Aid Society emphasized the importance of women asserting their rights to inheritance and claiming their rightful place in society. She also shared that the Sindh Legal Advisory Call Centre offers legal aid in family, criminal, and economic issues, facilitated by retired Supreme Court judges and experienced lawyers.



ISLAMABAD: Participants at the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference organised by PODA at Lok Virsa. — Online

Importance of empowering women highlighted

By Our Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Dr Shahida Rehmani, who is chairperson of the Women Parliamentary Caucus, on Wednesday emphasised the importance of empowering women to speak on their own issues.

She was speaking to participants, mostly women from 130 districts, who gathered in the capital for the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference organised by the Potohori Organisation for Development Advocacy (Poda).

The event brought together women from all four provinces, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir to amplify their voices and push for education, equality and stronger legislation on key issues affecting rural communities.

Shahida Rehmani committed to proposing October 15 as 'National Rural Women's Day' at the policy level.

The conference, attended by representatives from 150 community-based organisations, provided a platform for women to address critical challenges like gender-based violence, sexual harassment and the need for greater educational access.

Emphasising Article 25-A of the Constitution, which guaranteed education for children aged five to 16, participants called education a vital safeguard



WOMEN from various parts of the country attend the second day of the Poda conference in Islamabad on Wednesday. — Online

against gender violence.

A key demand voiced by the rural leaders was the recognition of agriculture fields as workplaces. This move, they said, would ensure that women farmers receive their fair share of government support and services, such as loans and subsidies.

During the event, Deputy Speaker of the Balochistan Assembly Ghazala Gola

shared the situation in Sohbatpur, where women often lack an independent identity. She announced her party's effort to raise the minimum marriage age for girls from 16 to 18 through a new bill in the provincial assembly.

The first strategy session of the day, titled 'Women's Rights Commitments in Political Parties' Manifestos 2024', brought together women politicians

from PPP, ANP, PML-N, JWP and JI.

Senior parliamentarian and PPP senator Farhatullah Babar described the conference as a significant intellectual forum that should not be ignored. Women political workers called for immediate local government elections, demanding proportional representation and full functionality of local bodies.

In the second session on raising the legal marriage age to 18, Norwegian Ambassador Pur Albert Ilsaas addressed participants, noting the positive energy and inclusivity of the conference.

He emphasised that empowering women and increasing their participation in society could help Pakistan tackle many of its pressing challenges.

The ambassador reaffirmed his country's commitment to collaborating with Poda on reducing early marriages and supporting sexual and reproductive health rights.

Legal experts, including advocate Khawaja Zahid Nasim, discussed gaps in existing laws, while Advocate Noureen Mumtaz Chattha presented Islamic perspectives supporting legal reforms in Punjab.

The conference was supported by the European Union Delegation to Pakistan, the Norwegian embassy and several local organisations, reflecting a broad commitment to advancing women rights and leadership across the country.

TWIN CITIES



Coordinator to the Prime Minister on Climate Change, Romina Khurshid Alam addressing at the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference at Lok Virsa in Federal Capital.

Rural women playing vital role in agriculture, economic growth: Romina

STAFF REPORTER

Coordinator to Prime Minister on Climate Change, Romina Khurshid Alam on Tuesday said that in any society where sustainable development is paramount, the pivotal role of rural women in agriculture and community development cannot be overlooked.

Addressing as chief guest at the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference at the Lok Virsa open-air auditorium organized by civil society organisations here, she said that rural women are not only the backbone of agricultural production but also vital contributors to economic growth, food security, and social cohesion.

Accounting for a significant portion of the agricultural

workforce in the country, rural women provide a major labour force for key agricultural activities including planting, harvesting and managing livestock, ensuring that families and communities have access to adequate food and health, she added.

"Their traditional knowledge and innovative practices enhance productivity and contribute to sustainable farming methods. By empowering women with resources, training, and access to markets, we can increase agricultural output and improve food security for millions", the PM's coordinator remarked.

She further said that beyond farming, rural women are crucial for economic diversification. Many engage in small-scale

enterprises, from food processing to handicrafts, creating jobs and boosting local economies. Their entrepreneurial spirit can drive innovation and resilience in rural areas, laying the groundwork for sustainable economic growth.

Rural women are now seen more at the forefront of community development activities. Because, they take on leadership roles in local organizations, advocate for their rights, and mobilize resources for various initiatives. Their involvement fosters social cohesion and empowers communities to address challenges collaboratively, the PM's coordinator highlighted.

Highlighting women's immense role in climate resilience building and environ-

mental sustainability in the country, Romina Alam said as stewards of the land, rural women are crucial for promoting environmental sustainability and boosting as well as sustaining climate resilience activities in different socio-economic areas, particularly agriculture, water management and low-carbon energy development.

She also highlighted that various study findings on women's role in sustainable community and rural development and natural resource management in Asia-Pacific region have concluded that their practices often reflect a deep understanding of local ecosystems, contributing to biodiversity conservation and climate resilience.



PARTICIPANTS of 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference held under the auspices of PODA at Lok Virsa in Islamabad pose with European Union Ambassador Dr Riina Klonka on Thursday. — White Star

Rural women leadership moot ends with emphasis on gender equality

EU envoy encourages women to continue questioning outdated norms and pursue their ambitions, thereby empowering others

By Our Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: The 17th annual rural women leadership training conference concluded on Thursday with an emphasis on gender equality and advancement of women's political leadership.

The conference was organised by PodA.

At a ceremony, European Union Ambassador to Pakistan Dr Riina Klonka unveiled a new 4 million project focused on fostering leadership skills for women across the nation.

Dr Klonka reaffirmed the EU's commitment to 100 per cent gender equality, commending the resilience of women leaders and their determination to challenge the status quo.

She praised the women pre-

sent as "troublemakers" in the best sense, highlighting their critical role in pushing societal boundaries. She encouraged them to continue questioning outdated norms and pursue their ambitions, thereby empowering others.

According to a statement, the conference saw participants from 130 districts from the four provinces, AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan.

It provided a platform for women leaders to discuss their experiences and strategies for change.

Mariolina Armellini, Italian Ambassador to Pakistan, emphasised Italy's ongoing commitment to human rights and gender equality. Reflecting on her own upbringing, she shared her early experiences of advocating for her peers, and how she instilled values of respect and empowerment in her two sons.

Armellini assured the women leaders that half of Italy's

development projects will prioritise female beneficiaries.

Rakshanda Naz, Ombudsman for Workplace Harassment Prevention in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, expressed concern over increasing religious extremism which she said had diminished space for women. She urged rural women to draft a strong resolution to address these issues, pledging to forward it to the KP chief minister and relevant authorities.

During the special session on women's rights to inheritance, Rukhsana Parveen Khokhar from the Legal Aid Society stressed the significance of asserting inheritance rights, offering insights into available legal assistance.

The conference witnessed contributions from speakers, including Minister Dilshad Bano, Christina from Unesco and transgender rights advocate Lehar Mirza.

PodA Executive Director Sameena Nazir commended the efforts of all participants, calling them trailblazers.

A resolution passed by the conference called for ending child marriages by raising the legal age of marriage for girls to 18 across the country. Shields were presented to key supporters and contributors with special acknowledgements given to EU, the Norwegian embassy and other partner organisations for their support to the three-day event.

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Coordinator to the Prime Minister on Climate Change, Romina Khuraid Alam addressing as chief guest at the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference at Lok Virsa in Islamabad

Wednesday, October 23, 2024

Empowering Rural Women PODA's 17th annual leadership training moot kicks off

Executive Director of PODA, informed them that women make up around 60 percent of the agricultural labor force in Pakistan. However, research indicates that if these women had equal access to productive resources as men, they could increase farm yields by 20 to 30 percent, leading to a rise in total agricultural output in the country by 2.5 to 4 percent

STAFF REPORT

ISLAMABAD. PODA organized a 3-day 16th Annual Rural Women Leadership Conference in Islamabad which will culminate three days on award ceremony to honor the rural women leaders who have been excelled in their regions while promoting human rights. On the first day of PODA's 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference, women from over 132 districts nationwide, including the four provinces and the regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK, united to advocate for the recognition of women as "farmers." The fundamental focus of Tuesday's proceedings was to bring the issues facing rural women to the forefront, ensuring that they can benefit from government policies and services. Lok Virsa collaborated with PODA in organizing the 3-day conference on its premises. Prime Minister's Coordinator for Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, Ms. Rumina Khushid Alam, called for the empowerment of women to address climate change challenges while praising their contributions in agriculture, the economy, and other fields. Ms. Alam urged all provincial governments



to take steps toward empowering women and improving healthcare, particularly focusing on the rights of girls and women in rural areas. She commended the resilience of rural women in the face of challenges, emphasizing that their participation in decision-making processes and empowerment will positively impact the overall plight of women across the country. Ms. Alam informed the

women leaders that the federal government has launched a program in Balochistan titled "She Power," in collaboration with the Chinese government, aimed at improving health and hygiene conditions for girls and women. She stated that women's empowerment will have far-reaching impacts on the country's economy, agriculture, and climate change issues. While welcoming the women

leaders, Ms. Rumina Noor, Executive Director of PODA, informed them that women make up around 60 percent of the agricultural labor force in Pakistan. However, research indicates that if these women had equal access to productive resources as men, they could increase farm yields by 20 to 30 percent, leading to a rise in total agricultural output in the country by 2.5 to 4 percent.

This improvement could help reduce hunger and poverty while enhancing the quality of life for women, who are the backbone of the agricultural sector, she said. In a message, Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif commended the women participants for highlighting the progress and development of rural women. He emphasized that rural women play a crucial role in ensuring food security, maintaining agricultural sustainability, protecting the environment, and significantly contributing to the health and education sectors. He also reiterated his government's commitment to providing an enabling environment for all women and girls, particularly in rural areas, ensuring they have access to quality education, health services, vocational and professional training, and sustainable livelihoods. Director General of Population Welfare, Punjab, Ms. Saman Iqbal, appreciated PODA for its efforts in organizing an impactful gathering where women could come together to share their experiences, strengthen their leadership skills, and advocate for their rights in the agricultural sector.

Importance of empowering women highlighted

By Our Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Dr Shahida Rehmani, who is chairperson of the Women Parliamentary Caucus, on Wednesday emphasised the importance of empowering women to speak on their own issues.

She was speaking to participants, mostly women from 130 districts, who gathered in the capital for the 17th Annual Rural Women Leadership Training Conference organised by the Potohar Organisation for Development Advocacy (Poda).

The event brought together women from all four provinces, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir to amplify their voices and push for education, equality and stronger legislation on key issues affecting rural communities.

Shahida Rehmani committed to proposing October 15 as 'National Rural Women's Day' at the policy level.

The conference, attended by representatives from 150 community-based organisations, provided a platform for women to address critical challenges like gender-based violence, sexual harassment and the need for greater educational access.

Emphasising Article 25-A of the Constitution, which guaranteed education for children aged five to 16, participants called education a vital safeguard



WOMEN from various parts of the country attend the second day of the Poda conference in Islamabad on Wednesday. — Online

against gender violence.

A key demand voiced by the rural leaders was the recognition of agriculture fields as workplaces. This move, they said, would ensure that women farmers receive their fair share of government support and services, such as loans and subsidies.

During the event, Deputy Speaker of the Balochistan Assembly Ghazala

shared the situation in Sohbatpur, where women often lack an independent identity. She announced her party's effort to raise the minimum marriage age for girls from 15 to 18 through a new bill in the provincial assembly.

The first strategy session of the day, titled 'Women's Rights Commitments in Political Parties' Manifestos 2024', brought together women politicians

from PPP, ANP, PML-N, JWP and JI.

Senior parliamentarian and PPP senator Farhatullah Babar described the conference as a significant intellectual forum that should not be ignored. Women political workers called for immediate local government elections, demanding proportional representation and full functionality of local bodies.

In the second session on raising the legal marriage age to 18, Norwegian Ambassador Pur Albert Isaas addressed participants, noting the positive energy and inclusivity of the conference.

He emphasised that empowering women and increasing their participation in society could help Pakistan tackle many of its pressing challenges.

The ambassador reaffirmed his country's commitment to collaborating with Poda on reducing early marriages and supporting sexual and reproductive health rights.

Legal experts, including advocate Khawaja Zahid Nasim, discussed gaps in existing laws, while Advocate Noureen Mumtaz Chattha presented Islamic perspectives supporting legal reforms in Punjab.

The conference was supported by the European Union Delegation to Pakistan, the Norwegian embassy and several local organisations, reflecting a broad commitment to advancing women rights and leadership across the country.



Promoting Education, Economic Empowerment and Human Rights in Rural Pakistan

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