Why women are the future of Pakistan

Javaid Sofi

Nafisa (name changed) is a 6-year-old and misses her school friends; her school is shut because of lockdown in Karachi due to coronavirus. However, she may never go to school again, but the reason will not be coronavirus.

Not educating girls costs trillions of Dollars

Pakistan has the world’s second-highest number of out-of-school children with about 22.8 million children aged 5 to 16 not attending school, which represents 44% of the total population in this age group. Learning poverty is at 75% which is higher than the average in South Asia of 58%. When education investments do not result in adequate learning parents do not keep their children in school. Both boys and girls are being denied the right to an education; however, girls are disproportionately affected. Limited educational opportunities for girls and barriers to completing 12 years of education cost developing countries between $15 trillion and $30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings. Due to lack of education child marriages are rampant, 21% of girls in Pakistan marry before the age of 18, and 3% get married before age 15. Children born to adolescents are more likely to have a low birth weight, ill-health, stunting, and other poor nutritional outcomes, due to which Pakistan also has the worst infant mortality in the world.

74 percent of married women aged 15 to 49 don’t use effective contraception methods

Social norms act as another impediment for women. There are about 1,000 “honor” killings every year. The abortion rate in Pakistan is one of the highest in the world due to a lack of awareness of contraception. Over 2.2 million women get abortions every year, that’s 350 abortions every hour, and the vast majority of them are married, with three or four children already, who cannot and do not want to have another child. 74% of married women aged 15 to 49 years are not using an effective method of contraception. The charity Marie Stopes, whose clinics provide post-abortion care, has profiled a typical client in Pakistan: aged in her thirties, married at 18, she is poor, uneducated, and already has three children. Hence it is no surprise that Pakistan ranks near the bottom of the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index with only Iraq and Yemen ranking worse.
1 US$ spent on family planning returns US$ 120 of investment

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, Pakistan needs to focus on girls and women. They need to be the engine for the growth of the country. Overpopulation is a big problem in Pakistan with an annual growth rate of 2.4%, threatening any improvements in the living standard in the poor country. The return on investment for meeting the demand for family planning and maternal and newborn services is US$ 120 per every US$1 spent. Empowering women will go a long way in transforming Pakistan. Gender equality goes hand in hand with the economic and social development of any society. Educating girls is one of the most important investments the state needs to make, and it always achieves the objectives. Every 1% increase in women’s education generates a 0.3% increase in economic growth. Educational gender equality decreases national poverty and is the foundation of stable societies.

Education will improve the productiveness of the women which will boost the economy, especially when only 26% of women are active in Pakistan’s labor force. Better educated women are healthier and take part more in the formal labor market. An extra year of primary school education boosts girls’ eventual wages by 10–20% and an extra year of secondary school adds 15–25%. Investing in women empowerment leads to healthier and better-educated children and families as women invest 90% of their income in their households compared to men’s 30 to 40%. Only 5% of Pakistani women over the age of fifteen have a bank account, compared to South Asia’s average of 37%.

The investments that countries make in girls today will shape their lives and those around them for generations to come. Increased education is the reason for half of the economic growth in OECD countries in the past 50 years, and that has a lot to do with bringing more girls to higher levels of education and achieving greater equality in the number of years spent in education between men and women.”

30 percent increase in GDP by empowering Pakistan’s women

The empowerment of women is more important than ever in Pakistan because of the recession caused by a coronavirus which will cost more than US$2 Trillion, to the global economy. Pakistan which was just recovering from the external crisis has to go back to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for another bailout whose impact is unimaginable. Pakistan’s GDP can increase by 30% if women are more empowered and play their role in the labor force. In Latin America and the Caribbean, women got support in the form of transport facilities and daycare centers by The World Bank, which resulted in more women pursuing their careers. Subsequently, it led to a drop in poverty; the income earned by these women reducing 30% of extreme poverty over 10 years.
Most public schools in Pakistan at the secondary level are at greater distances from one another, which is one reason that by the 9th grade only 13% of girls are still in school. Pakistan is spending less than 2.8% of its gross domestic product on education. Investment in educational infrastructure needs to be increased up to 6% so better facilities could be provided which would increase the number of girl students.

**Investing 1 US$ on contraceptive use saves US$ 2.5 in postnatal care**

Pakistan’s population is estimated to reach 403 million by 2050. It would not be possible to integrate all these people into the educational and labor market. Population growth at this level will be disastrous for Pakistan. Information about modern contraceptives needs to be provided to women, particularly living in rural areas. Family planning is one of the most efficient tools with which we can control population growth. Each year in Pakistan, about 9,700 women die from complications in pregnancy and childbirth, for every extra dollar spent on expanding modern contraceptive use, more than US$2.50 on maternal and newborn care will be saved.

Other Islamic countries like Iran and Bangladesh have invested heavily in family planning. In Iran, the average family has halved in size from 5.2 to 2.6 children while in Bangladesh fertility rates have halved from about 6 per woman in the early 1970s to fewer than 3 children per woman today. This population control has enabled Bangladesh to perform better than Pakistan in many development indicators such as education and health.

Pakistan needs to empower its girls so they could also contribute to its economic growth. Greater gender diversity would lead Pakistan towards economic and social prosperity. If women’s participation in Pakistan is equal to men’s we can see a gain of US $251 billion or $1,324 per person.

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*The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org*