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## **A Balancing Act: Striking an Equilibrium between Social Justice and Food Security through Gender Equality in Pakistan**

On December 27, 2007, gunshots and explosives assassinated a prominent political figure, whose final words had resounded only moments earlier during the deliverance a spirited address at a political rally (Assassination of Benazir Bhutto). The assassination of Benazir Bhutto brought global attention to the volatile state of Pakistani politics, ignited extensive political repercussions, and provoked fractious violence throughout the nation. But perhaps an even more crucial element behind the assassination, reflecting a deep-rooted problem in Pakistani society, was the simple fact that Bhutto was a woman (Bone 1). Gender-based inequalities in Pakistan have given rise to rampant, stochastic acts of violence condemned by the international community. But beyond the scope of women's rights, gender-based inequalities have tremendous, far-reaching implications. In a nation filled with gender-based political turmoil, as demonstrated through Bhutto's death, disparities in gender equality expand beyond the political sphere—by splintering social echelons and drastically hindering economic growth.

“Almost certainly, the first essential component of social justice is adequate food for all mankind” (Borlaug 1). As Norman Borlaug asserted in his 1970 Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, the dynamic between humanitarian equality and food security is such that making strides on humanitarian issues must almost certainly be heralded by steps towards ensuring the global food supply. However, with the case of Pakistan, the converse holds equally true, as the first step towards eliminating food insecurities is by achieving the social justice of gender equality. Outlined by the United Nations, the Millennium Declaration offers a framework for addressing food insecurity and economic development, presented in the form of eight Millennium Goals (Millennium Development Goals). In order to achieve these Millennium Goals by 2015, Pakistan must move to eliminate gender inequality, its primary facet of cultural discrimination, while simultaneously ensuring the peripheral issues of credit access and property rights for the impoverished are addressed.

### *Outlining the Socioeconomics of the Typical Pakistani Family*

The typical urban family in Pakistan is composed of Husna, the female model, and Hussein, the male model. The average Pakistani couple has three children, a number only derived from a total fertility rate of 3.17 children born per women (CIA Factbook). Solely based on population figures, the nation size is increasing at too rapid a rate to fully provide for the consumption needs of its citizens. Meanwhile, the nationwide median age is 21.6, indicating a high concentration of youth in the Pakistani population (CIA Factbook). As often demonstrated throughout history, one key factor to a country's sociopolitical and economic development can be a young, educated population. However, stark juxtapositions found in Pakistan's gender treatment—including the male literacy rate being at 63 percent while the female literacy rate suffers at 36 percent—stagnate this socioeconomic growth. (CIA Factbook). Despite the assets of a young population and a steadily increasing literacy rate, Pakistan's economy is not capable of yielding sufficient

incomes for its people. Although the average per capita income, as surveyed by the Pakistani Ministry of Finance, reports a 2009 to 2010 value of \$1051, a 2010 humanitarian analysis revealed that families in eastern Pakistan, the more rural and isolated section of the nation, faces far less favorable conditions than even that meager \$1051 (“Per Capita Income of Pakistan”). In fact, though sources such as the CIA World Factbook present a typical family having the adequate life conditions of Husna and Hussein, there is a great disparity between this average couple and a real life counterpart living in rural Pakistan today. The real life family of Nasim and Ilyas, reported to be a model of the average lower and middle income Pakistani family by the Integrated Regional Information Networks, earn Rs 3000 (USD 36) per month, a great deal less than Husna and Hussein (Sold into Sex Work).

“I struggle even to buy a single kilo of ‘atta’ [wheat flour], which costs Rs 30 [36 US cents], and even that produces just about half a ‘roti’ [flat bread] for each of us,” Ilyas explained. For wife Nasim and husband Ilyas, securing each meal for their family is a miraculous feat. “Especially at night, it is painful to hear the children beg for more food. Sometimes they snatch food from each other,” Ilyas lamented (Sold into Sex Work).

However, an even more notable phenomenon arises from the study of the lives of Nasim and Ilyas. Nasim explained if they had a son, the situation would be different because they could send him out to work, “but with only girls, we simply don’t know what to do.” In a household of seven, the only use Ilyas finds for his eldest two daughters is to fetch water from a nearby well. “It is unthinkable I could sell our children, but sometimes I wonder what on earth we are to do. Our cousin who lives just outside Lahore sold a kidney to try and make ends meet,” Ilyas noted. “He was sick afterwards and could not work, so he sold his 14-year-old daughter for Rs 50,000 [\$600] to a man who said he wanted to marry her. The man was over 50 years old, and after a month, he sent the girl out to work as a prostitute. Essentially, this is that man’s business. My cousin knew, but he had no choice.” There is extremely limited data on the number of child sex workers in Pakistan; the subject has long been perceived as taboo. In fact, the first official admission that child sex workers exist in Pakistan was detailed by the government’s National Commission for Child Welfare and Development only a decade ago, in 2001 (Sold into Sex Work).

But it is taboos, like those against prostitution discussions, that continue to exacerbate these problems of gender inequality. “It is common for families not to use contraception. Men say going on the pill may make women promiscuous by encouraging them to have sex outside marriage, and they decline to use condoms themselves,” Javeria Ali, a gynecologist who works at a community clinic in Lahore, told IRIN. Additionally, these beliefs stem from religion, be it Islam or Christianity. “Married men who buy condoms are sniggered at. Besides, I can’t afford it,” said Ilyas, who is a Christian. “Children are given by God. We should not stop this. It is wrong to do so” (Sold into Sex Work). Sadly, the implications of gender inequality extend far beyond Pakistani girls being sold into sex slavery and lack of contraceptive use.

### *Defining Pakistani Gender Inequality*

The social justice of gender equality can be understood as achieving the same access of rights and resources for both males and females. According to The Social Institutions and Gender

Index (SIGI), Pakistan ranks 94th out of 102 countries in regards to gender equality, based on educational attainment, the health status, economic and political participation, and social institutions (The Social Institutions and Gender Index). In Pakistan, examples of gender-based social travesties—ranging from rape and mutilation to sexual harassment and trafficking—are often thrown into sharp prominence on a global scale. Because Pakistan lacks any sort of specific regulations or laws with jurisdiction over gender-related violence, these acts of violence often fall into the category of the general Penal Code. This therefore demotes these actions to being perceived as just normal or average crimes, failing to address the nature and the underlying motivations behind these gender-related crimes. Seeing as how the government doesn't establish any sort of strong legislative and enforcement stance against these crimes, social change is hindered, spousal rape, dowry-related violence and honor killings continue to plague Pakistani women (Gender 1).

Pakistan currently ranks 64th out of 112 nations in terms of the Physical Integrity Sub-Index (Gender 1). But beyond the scope of physical women's rights, the issue of gender inequality of Pakistan also spills over into other social justices, such as liberty, equality, and gender cooperation. In fact, the nation ranks 79th out of 122 in Ownership Rights Sub-Index, 103rd out of 122 in Civil Liberties Sub-Index, 118th out of 122 in Son Preference Sub-Index (Gender 1). For the purpose of this essay, the term "conflict" will be used in a sense broader than that of mere acts of violence.

One key component of these social justices is the issue of ownership rights. Though women have technical right to own land, female land ownership remains at extremely low levels. In 2005, the International Centre for Research on Women discovered that, though 67 percent of sampled villages had laws allowing women to inherit and own land, women on the whole owned less than 3 percent of this land (Gender 1). Additionally, even in many instances when women do own property or land, they lack actual ownership of it (Gender 1). Another set of circumstances in which legislative equality does not translate to actual women's rights regards to bank loans and credit institutions. Despite the fact that women are able to take these loans, they often times lack the necessary collateral and therefore are prevented from starting up their own small businesses or simply providing for their families (Gender 1). Additionally top-level jobs still go to men, to a severe degree. Women are gradually achieving more and more political weight in the Pakistan, but often times only when pushed by quotas and other special enforcements (Millennium 1).

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Pyramid of Hate denotes that prejudiced attitudes, acts of prejudice, and discrimination are, respectively, the first three steps by which societies can progress towards genocide. As was made apparent by the Physical Integrity ranking, Pakistan has far progressed past these first three steps. The existence of prejudiced attitudes towards women by the patriarchal government spawns acts of prejudice, both from the government and from the public. This paves the way for direct acts of discrimination, as attested to by the Ownership and Son Preference rankings in the nation. These first three steps then culminate in violence, according to the ADL, both in terms of people and property. The lack of property rights of women is compounded when arson and desecration are committed against their existing land or wealth, while threats, assaults, terrorism, and murder impact the women, themselves. But Pakistan's ascent up the Pyramid of Hate ends there; the pyramid is finally topped by genocide—a step the nation has, fortunately, not reached.

### *Defining Pakistani Food Insecurity*

In 1996, the World Health Organization labeled food security as a point at which “all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” and subsequently divided food security into three vital components—food availability, access, and use (WHO 1). Therefore, the adequate amount of food present to a population, the availability of this food on a constant basis, and the knowledge of nutrition and diet are three key aspects of food security. When this theory is applied specifically to Pakistan, it is clear that Pakistan does not meet these standards. A report conducted by the United Nations World Food Program found that 21 out of the some 56 million citizens inhabiting urban Pakistan are “food insecure” (PAKISTAN 1). Problems ranging from under nutrition and malnutrition to hunger, disease, and poverty are plaguing 95 Pakistani districts (PAKISTAN 1),

With a population growth rate estimated at 1.573 percent in the year 2011, solely based on population statistics, the nation size is increasing at too rapid a rate to fully provide for the consumption needs of its citizens. This high population and increasing population growth rate further compounds the issues of food insecurity, due to a lack of resources to meet the bolstered demand. Between the years 2005 and 2007, 26 percent of its total population was found undernourished. This value translates to 43.4 million people, a number that has increased drastically from its standing at 36.1 million in the years 2000 to 2002, and even more so from its standing at 26.9 million in the years 1995 to 1997. Clearly, as the decades have progressed, Pakistan’s food insecurities have worsened, and this has a great deal to do with the very basic social conditions (population growth) of Pakistan. Additionally, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), growing unemployment is a large contributing factor to poverty. As per independent estimates, the unemployment rate is currently at 15.2 percent (Sold into Sex Work). This means that these families cannot even look to elevating their socioeconomic status through work in order to bolster their financial, and food, security.

### *Connections between Food Insecurity and Gender Inequality*

The role that gender discrimination, coupled with economic disparities, plays in Pakistan’s food insecurities is that it does not allow families to earn sufficient incomes in order to access the food and nutrition they need. Though the economic conditions in general of Pakistan are marginally rising, individual families still face dire food crises on a day-to-day basis. But the severity of the situation affects not only women in the nation, but all middle to low income families around Pakistan as well, whether rural or urban. In addition, the reason behind the lack of understanding of these problems could be the lack of tools of measurements. The government could be minimizing the implications of the situation by skewing statistics, while non-affiliated organizations within the country might not have enough revenue to conduct proper research.

Consequently, it can be determined that the inclusion of women into social echelons and political strata will propel forth economic growth. It would endlessly benefit women, but the inclusion of women would also increase family incomes and thus, increase the amount of food to which families have access. Furthermore, it would lead to large scale economic development and poverty eradication. Other major unavoidable factors, such as climate change, could be more

effectively dealt with and factors such as population growth, pollution, water scarcity, and energy demand, could be avoided altogether through preventative measures.

### *Case Study of Tunisia, Applied to Pakistan*

With a focused understanding of the situation in Pakistan in mind, a case study in Tunisia can be analyzed and applied to Pakistan in order to consider implications for Pakistan's future. A clear link between reducing gender discrimination and economic improvements is apparent, to which recent studies conducted in Tunisia can attest. Tunisia, now ranking 25th on the SIGI scale, has made great leaps in addressing problems of gender inequality. Over fifty years ago, the Tunisian government began implementing changes, such as eliminating the family code and banned discriminatory gender practices including polygamy and repudiation, while also bolstering support for consensual marriage, and introducing equal divorce laws. Beyond rights for women, these drastic reforms also promoted higher educational enrollment rates for both girls and boys. Meanwhile, Tunisia is currently in the process of economic reform liberalization, and prudent fiscal planning has resulted in slow but sustained growth over the past few decades. In the World Economic Forum 2008/2009 Global Competitiveness Report, the country ranks first in Africa and 36th globally for economic competitiveness, reflecting the great progress its initiatives have yielded. Women, who account for 30% of Tunisia's population in 2010, contribute actively to boosting the development process and achieving desired objectives, primarily achieving an economic growth rate of over 5% per year, creating income sources, increasing the per-capita income to 5,000 dinars, reducing the poverty rate to 3.8% and limiting the unemployment rate to less than 14%. Tunisian women's access to the world of business dates back to the 70's. These women entered the business sphere in an organized and comprehensive fashion, owing that to the various measures and incentives decided for their benefit, triggering the start of a new era in which women became officials, leaders, and business managers. Since then, the Tunisian economy has maintained its economic growth, indicating a clear link between gender equality and economic progress.

The Tunisia of decades ago and the Pakistan of today, bear a great deal of similarities in terms of socioeconomic conditions. In fact, Tunisia has been hailed as a model to which other African and Middle Eastern nations may look in order to progress forth in economic modernization and overall growth. Specifically, in many ways, Tunisia faced similar issues to those of Pakistan. Amidst the regions of Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia and Pacific, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia, the region of South Asia surpasses the rest in terms of highest gender inequality. However, North Africa and South Asia came in a close second, indicating a clear extremity of circumstances in Tunisia as well as Pakistan. Moreover, both nations had a young population with a steadily increasing education rate, indicating a potential for change in Pakistan similar to that of Tunisia.

Undoubtedly, when applied to Pakistan, this model case study has certain limitations. Pakistan is a country largely influenced by the Middle East, a region known for its patriarchal ways and its often widespread and severe cases of gender inequality, arguably more so than Africa. Furthermore, the religious and cultural climate is unique to Pakistan, with 95% Muslim (and 5% Hindu/Christian/other) population. The nation's deep-seated clinging to its past has prevented it

from making strides to achieve social modernization, in terms of social ideology (CIA Factbook). This is a decisive factor that has also hindered its economic modernization.

Still, the precedent set forth by Tunisia offers a unique concept—instead of a solely theoretical approach to ameliorating Pakistan’s food crisis, a more practical method with successful precedent can be applied though the engendering of Pakistan. Therefore, in addition to removing laws and investing in women like Tunisia, Pakistan must follow its own path. The third Millennium Development Goal state that “poverty is a major barrier to education, especially among older girls”, but lack of education is also a major cause of poverty. Top-level jobs still go to men, to a severe degree. Women are slowly rising to political power, but mainly when boosted by quotas and other special measures. This can be encouraged by organizations such as the United Nations, and countries such as the United States, who have large amounts of socioeconomic sway over Pakistan.

### *Impacts of Gender Equality on Food Security*

“Knowing that hunger and gender inequality go hand-in-hand, an important step to ending world hunger is empowering women and eradicating gender disparities in education, health, economic participation, and political opportunities,” said Joachim von Braun, IFPRI director general (Global 1).

The precedent set forth by Tunisia offers a unique value—instead of a solely theoretical approach to ameliorating Pakistan’s food crisis, a more practical method with successful precedent can be applied though the engendering of Pakistan. This can be encouraged by organizations such as the United Nations, and countries such as the United States, who have large amounts of socioeconomic sway over Pakistan. By increasing gender equality in education and access to resources, child mortality and fertility can be reduced, while an expansion of education to the next generation can be provided. The reduction of population is instrumental to increasing food access to all members of Pakistan, while education is the first step to improving the state of the national economy. The economic growth that this would spur will reduce the poverty in the nation, thereby increasing access to resources such as food.

With Pakistani food insecurities being an expansive problem impacting many aspects of political and social issues in Pakistan, it proves as a herculean task to address. But with optimism garnered from the model of Tunisia coupled with the understanding that address gender inequalities can yield positive impacts on food security, the future of Pakistan has hope. It is only by allowing women to step out of their homes and into the workplace can begin to Pakistan step out of its food crisis. Though remnants of her legacy in politics remain upheld by the succession of her husband, current Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, nothing yet stands for Bhutto’s death, as a woman.

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