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Pakistan

The Awami Workers Party prepares for its second All Women's Convention

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Under the Awami Workers Party's policy on empowerment and status of women unveiled in March 2014, the party had committed to a 5-point communiqué that demanded the elimination of all social, economic and administrative structures that have led to gender-based exploitation. This document not only highlighted guiding principles for the party in terms of women's participation within the organisation, it was a reminder of the harsh political climate in which men and women must act as agents of radical change.

In 2016, as the party prepares for its second All Women's Convention, many political realities remain unchanged but the events of the preceding year serve as an opportunity for the AWP's diverse cadre to engage with these conditions and allow the party to set goals that seek to transform these conditions by offering pro-people alternatives.

In 2015, the Awami Workers Party participated in local government elections in several cities of Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Punjab, with some successes and several defeats. Baba Jan, the party's candidate for Gilgit-Baltistan legislative assembly, also ran a popular campaign. At the same time, the party's chapter in Rawalpindi, where its activists have organised against evictions from informal settlements, faced a crackdown by the CDA in August when the authority demolished hundreds of houses and displaced even more families.

AWP's women activists were at the forefront of all these efforts and their dedication encouraged more young women towards the party. The party is proud of these comrades who helped develop a grassroots presence in these areas. The diversity of women associated with the AWP is a reminder that women are not additional pools of voters, as all mainstream parties of Pakistan treat them. Rather, they are grassroots sources of radical social change.

Many political leaders of Leftist formations have often overlooked this value of gender as a forceful tool of political analysis and have ignored patriarchal structures not only in the society but also within their own organisations. This oversight has prevented many well-intentioned leftists from evolving a political programme that caters to all marginalised social groups, including women.

At the societal level, this disregard is reflected in the absence of electoral campaigns focusing on women's issues, lack of enforcement of laws that intend to protect women and relegation of women mostly to token positions in the parliament. Thus, women's concern do not qualify as a core subject of electoral and parliamentary politics in the country.

Emphasis on the political roots of economic and social deprivation permeates all public positions of the AWP. Its stance on women's issues is also informed by this attitude, i.e., that the conditions women face are a direct result of the barriers that prevent them from effectively mobilizing as a political force: a mass women's movement with a clearly defined agenda.

The Awami Workers Party hopes to build on this discourse as it believes that women's struggles are fought on both an ideological, representational level and an experiential and everyday level. The value of this belief lies in its political effectiveness and for All Punjab Women's Conference 2016, the party not only reaffirms its commitment to the March 2014 communiqué, it resolves to become a platform women across the country can truly own.

1. Wage policy: The Constitution of Pakistan contains a range of provisions with regards to labour rights. Article 11 of the Constitution prohibits all forms of slavery, forced labour and child labour. Article 17 provides for a fundamental

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right to exercise the freedom of association and the right to form unions. Article 25 lays down the right to equality before the law and prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of sex alone. Article 37(e) makes provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work, ensuring that children and women are not employed in vocations unsuited to their age or sex, and for maternity benefits for women in employment.

Despite these constitutional safeguards, it is no secret that millions of workers - men, women and their entire families - work and live in terrible conditions. The AWP believes that lack of enforcement of legislation under these constitutional provisions has facilitated exploitation of labour, a large part of which are women who are overlooked as productive members of the country's workforce. This neglect can be traced in all of Pakistan's labour policies enacted by various political regimes whose visions for economic prosperity have lacked pro-women objectives. Its effects can be seen on the living standards of working class families, where women dedicate long hours at home and at work because of the exigencies of the family and the national economies.

The Awami Workers Party believes that women's rights and economic development are correlated and that there can be no social or economic progress until the state makes efforts to address structural inequalities that prevent women from realising their full potential as one half of the country's citizenry.

In 2015, the government of Pakistan announced Rs13,000 minimum wage for unskilled labour. The minimum wage policy and its enforcement require a critical study, as thousands of women are employed in the informal sector and there is no mechanism for ensuring their mental, physical and economic well-being. Women have historically struggled against a gender-based pay differential and work conditions but the situation is particularly dire in Pakistan. The AWP demands implementation of minimum wage across the board, for women and men. It particularly calls to attention the work conditions of women employed in factories, kilns, handicrafts. The party also calls to attention the plight of domestic workers, many of whom are young girls from low-income households. The party's Wage Action Committee, formed in 2015, will focus on these issues as part of its broader campaign for enforcement of minimum wage.

2. Tokenism: While many political parties boast of women leaders, women's issues continue to be ignored in parliamentary forums. Parliamentary caucuses have few women with backgrounds in advocacy and legislation. Moreover, there is poor enforcement of laws enacted by these leaders, which is why the state continues to fail women of the country in terms of protecting their economic, social and political rights. The party believes that these women leaders fail to represent working class women because they are not empowered within their own political spaces and their political goals are dictated by patriarchal party leaderships.

The AWP is weary of state feminism and rejects depoliticisation of women's issues. The party seeks to create an enabling environment for its activists which it hopes will allow original political initiatives that bring the problems of women (working, unemployed, housewives, victims of violence) to the fore of public discourse.

3. Harassment: Women in all spheres of life face harassment of varying sorts. These includes their workplaces, homes, varsities and their political spaces . These instances are not limited to a particular space or time and the behaviour that facilitates such instances is a by-product of socialisation of men and women based on patriarchal gender norms. The AWP envisions a society free of such tendencies and its political program is geared towards this objective. It recognises that any such program cannot be implemented overnight and requires a long-term vision and commitment. However, a long-term program of progressive political change alone is not sufficient to address concerns emerging out of the everyday life, in general, and the party's activism, in particular. To this effect, the AWP acknowledges the need to put in place mechanisms that discourage and check such behaviour, penalising it when and where needed, in society at large as well as within the party's own organisation.

Borrowing from the Protection of Women Against Harassment of the Workplace Act, 2010, the AWP resolves to form

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a committee to evolve such a mechanism. The committee will also develop sensitization training for the party cadre. It is hoped that such measures will strengthen camaraderie between men and women within the party and create an empowering environment for women in which they can organise and mobilise for their issues. The AWP, as the only Left party in the country, recognizes the need for formidable and concrete measures to create inclusive political spaces for women.

4. Mobility and public spaces: The AWP recognizes the structures that restrict women's mobility and presence in the public sphere. The party believes there is need to push for greater mobility of women and their presence in public spaces. It welcomes collaborations and ventures with autonomous groups in this regard.

5. Civil-military relations: The AWP recognises the crucial linkages between exploitative economic relations (between capitalists and wage labourers) and patriarchal social structures. Modern capitalist state as a historical entity has emerged out of these patriarchal structures and exists in a symbiotic relationship with such structures. This relationship is particularly strong in post-colonial societies where civil and military bureaucratic elites, in cahoots with their imperialist paymasters, routinely suppress democratic forces and social movements of the marginalised groups, including women.

In this backdrop, the AWP believes the National Action Plan against terrorism is just another attempt (by the military establishment, its junior partners in the civil bureaucracy and capitalist political class) to consolidate its 'fractured hegemony' over the society. In spite of the presence of an elected government, the military establishment enjoys de facto control of all key decisions pertaining to national security and foreign affairs in the wake of the NAP. Democracy exists in the country in name only. The anti-terrorism laws passed under the NAP serve to inhibit political rights and civil liberties of the people and, if and when needed, may provide a pretext to the state to crackdown on populist and democratic efforts. Opposition to the NAP and the military establishment's control of statecraft should, therefore, be a core concern for any left-leaning effort towards the emancipation of the working classes as well as the women.

Meanwhile, opposition to the NAP should not be confused with support or sympathy for Islamist terrorism. The AWP strongly opposes right-wing extremism represented by Islamist and traditionalist political forces and their militant-wings. It just does not trust the existing state structures with efforts to overcome such forces. It believes that the only viable way to counter right-wing extremism is through mobilisation of marginalised social groups and their organisation into a movement for progressive social and economic change.

Awami Workers Party (AWP)