

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



April 12, 2017

'Women for Change'

In the changing landscape of Afghanistan's socio-political scenario, it is important to encourage and appreciate the role of women. Without women, the ongoing processes of change would never lead to a better society. Therefore, it is important to let women participate in different walks of life so that they are able to acquire their true position within the society and, at the same time, support the society achieve stability and prosperity.

In order to ensure that women play a role in the process of change and themselves become the change makers, Afghanistan Human Rights Action and Mobilisation (AHRAM), the European Union (EU) co-funded drive for human rights in Afghanistan has been launched in Kabul. The campaign is being jointly launched by Cooperazione per lo Sviluppo dei Paesi Emergenti (COSPE), Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWC) and Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN).

The campaign was aimed at to draw the attention of the Afghan Government and the international institutions to the need of removing the obstacles limiting the access to education of girls and of preparing female leadership in the country. The campaign supported positive measures to promote the role of women in politics, in social institutions, in the community at large and its process of change.

The changes in Afghan society must be analyzed from two perspectives. The first one must be analyzed from within Afghan society, keeping in consideration the social changes that occur with the interactions and development within the social institutions and other actors. Such a perspective depicts that Afghanistan is a tribal society with a slow pace of changes. The traditional culture and norms and values are strict and slow to change. Moreover, education, that can be a source of change, has not been able to penetrate Afghan society properly. Most of the rural areas still do not have schools and proper education. In addition, the education that is being provided contains obsolete curriculum that does not help much in changing the mentality of the people and thus the society as a whole. This slow pace of changes within Afghan society does not help much in changing the position of women. They, to a large extent, are still suffering from the discriminatory rules and regulations and social behavior.

Extremist and strict religious beliefs and practices have also made the changes less frequent. Strengthened by extremist religious institutions, these beliefs and practices have no positive approach towards changes and consider them evil. They also support the patriarchal setup and keep the discrimination against women intact and even invigorate it.

The political changes are also very slow as the political setups, in most of the areas, are non-existent. The democracy has not been able to reach to grass root level as local bodies are not chosen through any sort of election. The setup, therefore, is authoritative and dominated by tribal lords and extremist religious leaders, who do not welcome the positive changes at all.

The other perspective of changes in Afghan society must be understood in its relations with regional and international community and actors. The involvement of international community has strived to impose liberal and democratic changes in Afghan society. Though, it has been successful to a certain extent, the real changes are yet to be seen.

The regional countries on the other hand have always strived to promote and gain their interests in Afghanistan. They have not been supportive enough in bringing about long-lasting changes in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the capability of Afghan administrative structure has not been able to take full advantage from the external support and change the lives of the people of Afghanistan.

Another important factor to consider regarding the nature of changes that may occur in the times to come in Afghanistan's socio-political scenario is the ongoing transition period and the post-withdrawal era. As the security transition has been completed and most of the international troops have already withdrawn, there are concerns that the security situation may deteriorate and there may be many compromises in the peace deal with Taliban that may lead the society towards further religious extremism and backwardness.

The changes so far made and occurred and the ones that may follow do not seem to have much consideration regarding the rights of women and gender balance. Women have been discriminated and they may further be influenced by the future changes to a large extent as they are one of the weaker strata and weaker strata are influenced by transitions and instabilities to a large extent.

Moreover, women fear the return of Taliban-like era and fear that all the developments made for improvement of the status of women may be lost unless wise decisions are made. In the political bargain with Taliban for the peace process, it is possible that government may make certain compromises among which the law regarding the rights of women may suffer further.

Therefore, it is really necessary to understand the nature of mentioned changes and try to direct the efforts of the international community and regional players and also of the Afghan government itself in promoting the role of women in the process of change in Afghan society, as without their heightened role and position the changes may not prove to be fruitful for the society as a whole.



Working Children and Vague Future

By Mahdi Modabbir

The children's rights are one of the significant issues in Afghanistan which have been paid little attention. Back-breaking works by children are prohibited in national and international laws. However, there are children who are involved in manual labors and work in carpet industries and brick kilns.

Similar to younger generation and university graduates - who have no appropriate time and suffer from poverty and unemployment - Afghan children also spend hard time. In fact, there are no pleasure, fun, school and knowledge in the life of many Afghan children and their share of childhood world is work, selling on the street and earning bread. Scores of Afghan's working children are those who are supposed to go to school and learn reading, writing and life skills; however, they sell things in the crowded and dusty streets of Kabul, work as metalsmith's pupils and beg on busy roadsides so as to find morsels of bread for their families and support them rather than going to school or playing with the children of their age.

Such children wrestle with the life vicissitudes and their childhood moments are wasted. In addition to fun and training, children need protection. However, Afghanistan's labor children are abused, harassed, including physical violence, on streets. Instead of mother's gentle voice and father's caring hands, they suffer the sarcasm of passersby, business owners and customers. Very often, employers order and instruct them dos and don'ts with angry and insulting words.

The consequence of backbreaking work in unhealthy environment, which is full of physical and verbal violence, is unpleasant for children. They will be disappointed as a result of being exposed to injustice and degradation and will lose the opportunity of passing a normal childhood stages. Besides harming the children mentally and emotionally, working in unhealthy environment will destroy the opportunity of developing their talents and abilities. They have to work and deal for hours with the individuals who are not equal with them based on age and logic and live in different world - this will put an ill effect on their souls and minds and will hurt them mentally and emotionally.

On the other hand, the existence of working children reflect class difference in the society. They are part of a society deprived of equal facilities and opportunities. The fruit of the children's labor will be in favor of their exploiters which will widen the class gap in the society, increase poverty, hamper their access to knowledge and skill and will reduce

work force in the society. Meanwhile, this will increase social ills such as drug addiction, crime, exploitation, discrimination and poverty and also jeopardize social health and hamper progress and development in the society.

It is likely that Mafia and other bands will exploit children and pursue their aim through this means since children have no physical and mental power to defend themselves and may fall prey to them. Besides harming the children and destroying their life and future, this will change them into harmful elements in the society and perhaps into dangerous figures or expert members of Mafia.

Children are valuable assets for the future of all societies. We will have a bright future only if we grow up and be trained in appropriate conditions. Those who grow up in violent and unhealthy environment will not be useful asset for the future of a society.

As a result of not having appropriate opportunities for education and schooling, the working children will not be able to learn necessary skills for a better life. Therefore, they will not have equal rights with other citizens and will suffer from class differences - this will change them into outcasts and disillusioned individuals. So, they will resort to illegal works such as smuggling, robbery, etc. rather than useful activities.

Additionally, the working children of today will be the parents of tomorrow. So, when they grow up in unhealthy environment and pass life with various mental and emotional challenges, they will not be able to bring up their children. Their children will also grow up in unhealthy family environment and will inherit kinds of misfortune and mental and emotional sufferings. Hence, they will step in society with violent and restless morale which may increase social ills and disorders.

The future will be uncertain and ambiguous for the children. They will encounter many challenges in the future as they are wrestling with problems today. In fact, they are the burnt generation of today and our society's future that need urgent and immediate attention.

The government will have to adopt serious measures for protecting the children and implement the law on prohibition of children from labor. Similarly, the state should try to eliminate the class difference and provide the citizens with work and social services, for the families will not be compelled to involve their children in backbreaking labor rather than sending them to school.

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Pruitt and the Pesticide Threat

By Mojisola Ojebode

A new report issued by the United Nations (UN) takes a controversial stance on synthetic pesticides. The conventional wisdom is that they are essential to feed the world's growing population, which is expected to hit nine billion by 2050. But the report's authors call our reliance on synthetic pesticides "a short-term solution that undermines the right to adequate food and health for present and future generations." They are right.

As a scientist from Nigeria whose work focuses on controlling post-harvest losses, I have seen first-hand what happens when the use of synthetic pesticides is not properly regulated. Yet much of the world is still following the conventional wisdom, with dire consequences for public health.

The United States seems poised to increase its already extensive pesticide use further. Last month, former Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt was confirmed as director of the Environmental Protection Agency. Pruitt, who sued the EPA many times in his previous job, seems intent on slashing its budget and dismantling many of its regulations, including those for pesticides, which are essential to ensuring food safety.

Anybody who consumes food grown or produced in the US should now be worried. Indeed, dismantling the EPA amounts to arming a public-health time bomb - one that has detonated repeatedly in developing countries.

In 1984, a pesticide-manufacturing plant in Bhopal, India, released 27 tons of methyl isocyanate, a gas used to produce some pesticides. The leak killed an estimated 15,000-20,000 people, and left several thousand more with permanent disabilities. The plant was understaffed, and had substandard operating and safety procedures. None of the six safety systems that could have prevented the accident was operational.

The Bhopal tragedy remains the world's worst industrial disaster. But it is just a small part of an enormous tableau of needless suffering. The World Health Organization estimates that there are three million cases of pesticide poisoning worldwide each year, leading to up to 250,000 deaths. In 1996, for example, insecticide-treated brown beans, purportedly stored for planting, found their way onto the market in Nigeria, a "leak" connected with the deaths of a number of people in the southwest region of the country. In 2013, in India, an organophosphate pesticide killed 23 children, who ate a lunch of tainted rice, potatoes, and soy. These sorts of tragedies happen even when guidelines for pesticide registration and use are in place. In Nigeria, for example, the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) banned 30 agrochemicals (pesticides and fertilizers) in 2008, after a number of deaths and poisonings. But it was inadequate to prevent the deaths from pesticide poisoning of 18 people in Nigeria's Ondo state in 2015.

And the danger of inadequate regulation is not limited to acute disasters. The accumulation of toxic substances from

chemicals applied both in the field and in storage also contributes to the continuous decline in the quality of our natural environment - namely, our soil, water, and air.

More than 250 studies have linked agrochemicals to several types of cancers, including cancers of the brain, breast, colon, liver, lungs, prostate, and thyroid. Children, in particular, seem to be susceptible to the toxic effects of pesticides: research shows that the increased incidence of childhood leukemia and brain cancer could be the result of early exposure. And exposure to such chemicals has been linked to a variety of birth defects.

All of this paints a grim picture of what could happen in the US if the EPA's opponents - who now include the agency's director - get their way. In 2006 and 2007, the US used more than five billion pounds of pesticides annually - and that was with EPA regulations in place. Without adequate regulation, those quantities are likely to rise.

Of course, the US is not the only country at risk from excessive use of organophosphates. While pesticide use in developing countries is much lower than in the US, data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) show a steady increase in countries in Africa and Asia. Farmers in these regions are understandably looking for easy ways to reduce crop losses and increase their income. And there are few regulations in place to stop them.

In fact, the FAO reports that most pesticide-poisoning cases occur in developing countries, precisely because health standards there tend to be inadequate or non-existent. The UN report found that only 35% of developing countries had regulatory guidance on pesticide use, and all of them struggle with enforcement.

Developing countries must implement more effective mechanisms for monitoring the agrochemicals that are in circulation. They must also work to reduce the use of toxic chemicals to control pests and increase yields, especially by promoting organic alternatives that do not pose widespread health and environmental risks.

Such organic methods were used for centuries before the advent of modern synthetic pesticides in the 1940s. For example, organic manure can help boost crop yields, as can biopesticides, derived from plants. Such natural methods, which are both effective and non-toxic, should be adopted not just in developing countries, but around the world. Synthetic pesticides may have a place in helping to feed an increasingly hungry world, especially in developing countries. But we must imagine how many unnecessary poisonings and deaths will occur unless they are deployed with the utmost care and restraint. If Americans can't imagine that, Pruitt's dream, if not reconsidered, will become their nightmare.

(Courtesy Project Syndicate)
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