

NEWSCLIPPINGS

JULY TO DECEMBER 2021

WOMEN & CHILDREN



Urban Resource Centre

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NCRC asked to ensure protection of child rights in its strategic plan

Stakeholders, including officials from government departments, police, prisons, independent institutions and civil society have asked the National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRC) to include children's voices and other child-specific genuine issues about child rights in its strategic plan.

They were speaking at a strategic planning consultative workshop held at a hotel here on Tuesday.

They underscored the need for strengthening and empowering the NCRC so that the commission can operate as an independent national human rights institution (NHRI) as required by the international standards known as Paris Principles.

NCRC chairperson Afshan Tehseen said, in her opening remarks, that children make up 48 per cent of the population, but their voices are not heard in the policymaking process. "There is hardly any law and policy to take care of an estimated 25 million out-of-school children, most of whom end up as street children," she added.

She said that children are the most important asset of any society and needed attention at all levels, including policymaking. "It is important to ensure genuine and meaningful participation of children."

'There is hardly any law or policy to take care of an estimated 25m out-of-school children'

Shamim Mumtaz, chairperson, Sindh Child Protection Authority, said that overlapping in the authority and duplication of functions of various child rights-related institutions needed to be addressed. She highlighted various steps of the Sindh government related to child rights, including the passage of the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act 2013.

Other stakeholders suggested that the NCRC should address child rights concerns such as child labour, child marriages, child sexual abuse and discrimination in education on a priority basis. They also demanded increase in the education budget at least to the committed four per cent of gross domestic product.

They stressed that the NCRC, if empowered, can uplift the country's image at the international level by taking care of the protection and promotion of child rights in the country.

The NCRC should also maintain a national database on child rights-related indicators and share them with various stakeholders for informed policy decisions.

They also demanded the establishment of a national helpline for ensuring timely assistance to child victims of abuse.

Iqbal Detho and Jehanzeb Khan, members of the NCRC, also spoke. They said that the commission intended to focus on awareness-raising, review of child rights-related laws and provide assistance to the government in the implementation of international treaties, specifically the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Others who spoke included SSPs Shehla Qureshi and Imran Mirza; Special Secretary Law Imtiaz Shaikh; civil society leaders Mahnaz Rehman, Zahid Farooq, Tahir Iqbal and Rana Asif.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter Dawn, 13, 08/07/2021)

Crimes against women, children & minorities will not be tolerated: CM Murad

Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah presiding over a meeting on law and order on Friday categorically told the provincial police that he would not tolerate crimes against women, children, minorities and cases of kidnapping for ransom and drug trafficking.

"This should be considered as guiding principles and be focused accordingly — however, I am establishing a separate unit to monitor crime situations at CM House, therefore crime rate must be seen coming down in all the police zones/regions of the province," he added.

The meeting was attended by Chief Secretary Mumtaz Shah, IG Police Mushtaq Mahar and other relevant officials.

IG Mahar briefing the chief minister said that from Jan 1 to Aug 5, 2021 no terrorism and targeted killing incident took place in the province.

However, he said, 35 murders, 103 extortion cases and 118 cases of kidnapping for ransom were reported, adding that most of the kidnapping for ransom cases had taken place under honeytraps.

The Karachi police chief told the chief minister that overall law and order situation was under control in the city, however, a few incidents such as kidnapping and murder of a minor girl in Zaman Town, attack on Chinese national at Gulbai and looting of a cash van that resulted in the killing of two persons at F.B Area were worth mentioning.

The chief minister was told that Hyderabad range was traditionally a low-crime area, except Dadu district where violent incidents were being reported. At this the chief minister said that there were some reports that illegal trade of gutka/mawa were on the increase in Hyderabad region and the incident of Dodo Bheel and burning of house of Shankar Malhi were intolerable.

He directed the provincial police chief to convey his displeasure to the police officers of Hyderabad region.

The meeting was told that 40 rape cases and 272 cases of kidnapping have been reported this year.

The chief minister said that last year's data showed that only 192 kidnapping cases were reported, and asked why kidnapping was increasing. The IG said that most of the cases had taken place under honeytraps.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 16, 14/08/2021)

Activists join hands in Karachi to denounce violence against women

'Stop violence against women!' was the main demand on everyone's lips at a protest demonstration organised by the Joint Action Committee for Human Rights outside the Karachi Press Club on Friday.



A large number of protesters were there to raise their voice against the brutal assault of a young female TikTok star at the Greater Iqbal Park in Lahore, where the Minar-i-Pakistan is located, on the occasion of Pakistan's Independence Day.

Yasir Husain, a young environmental activist, said that what happened with the TikToker is not to be tolerated. "Our roads, our parks, our homes should be safe for all women, children, transgenders and men. But here we see people breaking all kinds of laws for fun. Our society is not to tolerate this kind of behaviour," he said.

Habibuddin Junaidi, president of Peoples Labour Bureau, said that it was an act of barbarianism and extremist behaviour. "I could only see lack of education here. And the education I am talking about should begin from home because it is the kind of education that changes mindsets," he said.

Nuzhat Shirin, chairperson of the Sindh Commission on the Status of Women, also said that the incident reflected on the worrisome mindset of our society that needed to be dealt with under utmost urgency.

Protesters demand justice for the young female TikTok star who was brutally assaulted in Lahore

"The pre-existing fear that women and transgender persons feel within the realms of public spaces has increased to an alarming extent. The fact that around 400 men got away with leaving a woman traumatised for the rest of her life, shows how the cycle of gender-based violence has been enabled by the system of the patriarchal mindset.

Security needed at public places

"There should be sufficient security deployed at all public spaces to ensure such tragic incidents do not take place and helplines should be made functional for emergencies like the one that the nation recently witnessed," she said.

Poet Fatima Hassan said that there is a need to make women strong in course books. "Women are always shown as weak and vulnerable in schoolbooks, which must change. I also want to see more women in our police force, Rangers and Army. They should be there protecting our parks, they should be there on our highways, too," she said.

Nasir Mansoor of the National Trade Union Federation spoke about the feudal mindset. "Our prime minister says that women should dress decently as men are not robots. But here in our country, women are not even safe in their graves. We see Taliban powers working here as well," he said.

Zehra Khan of the Home-Based Women Workers Federation said that the state needs to change the narrative. "Women here [are] looked at and treated as footwear. She is not respected, she is seen as a thing of entertainment. And this is the thinking of our society. We won't rest till women here get equal respect. They deserve respect, and they should get the respect that they deserve," she said.

Mahnaz Rahman, resident director of the Aurat Foundation Pakistan, said that this fresh incident occurred when people here were still in shock over Noor Mukadam's murder. "What could be worse? Someone tell me, are women a meat shop and are men hungry dogs," she asked angrily.

'Women should be treated equal'

Human rights activist Zahid Farooq of the Urban Resource Centre said that women should be treated equal as men. "The gender difference should not lower the woman's status in any way. Her gender should not be the reason for discrimination," he said.

Qazi Khizr, vice chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said that all this violence against women needs to stop. "And we can only make it stop through punishment. The punishments should be so severe that the persons getting them are made examples for others to not dare disrespect a woman," he said.

The protesters belonged to a number of organisations including the Aurat Foundation, Aurat March, Democratic Students Federation, Democratic Youth Front, HRCF, Every Woman Treaty, Hum Aurtein, HANDS, HBWWF, Inkar Karo, Joint Action Committee for People's Rights, Karachi Citizen's Forum, Legislative Watch Group, NOW Communities, NTUF, Pakistan Women's Media Network, PILER, Peace and Development Organisation, Pakistan Medical Association, Pakistan Women's Foundation for Peace, Pakistan Qaumi Mahaz-i-Azaadi, Pakistani Women's Media Network, Graduates Forum, Siasi Aurat Tehreek, Sindhu Vaas Foundation, Takhleeq Foundation, Tehrik-i-Niswan, Uks Research Centre, Women's Action Forum, War Against Rape, WFFP and Women Democratic Front.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 13, 21/08/2021)

SHC orders Sindh govt to provide facilities to all special children

The Sindh High Court has expressed serious concerns over registration of only 3,653 special children out of 300,000 across the province and directed the provincial authorities to provide facilities to all physically-challenged children.

The two-judge bench comprising Justices Salahuddin Panhwar and Adnan-ul-Karim Memon also formed a committee to visit rehabilitation and autism centres in the province to ascertain the available facilities, building condition and teaching staff after an official claimed that Rs150 million had been allocated for such purpose.

It also directed the committee to examine the medical facilities being provided at such centres and whether the health department was providing treatment to children, including major surgery and to give recommendations with regard to provision of facilities, upgrade and improvement of education and asked it to complete this exercise within two weeks.

When the bench took up the matter for hearing, the secretary of the department of empowerment of persons with disabilities (DEPD), Akhtar Bugti, contended that as per Bureau of Statistics there were 300,000 physically challenged children whereas registered special children in six rehabilitation centres of the province were 3,653 only.

Court takes exception to the fact that of 300,000 special children in the province only 3,653 are registered

The bench said that this was a pure denial of rights of such children and compelled the court to take cognizance as only 3,653 students were receiving education thereby closing the doors upon majority of such children.

“Accordingly, the department through special secretary shall pursue government of Sindh and ensures that all special children receive all facilities”, it added.

The secretary further maintained that the department was providing education and transport facility, but there were recruitment rules about special qualification and training within the department and many posts were lying vacant, adding that autism centres and academies had been established under the Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018.

At this juncture, it surfaced that there were 176 sanctioned posts of BPS-17 whereas only 50 teachers/officers were working in the DEPD. The bench deplored that poor number of registered special children was already an alarming situation while sanctioned posts were also not filled.

It directed the secretary to ensure that rest of the posts were filled on urgent basis, maybe on ad-hoc basis if law provided so, and those appointed on ad-hoc basis would not be entitled to insist for their regularisation except through Sindh Public Service Commission.

The bench also constituted a five-member committee after the secretary of DEPD claimed that Rs150m had been allocated for rehabilitation and autism centres.

It said that the committee will visit and submit its report till Sept 30 regarding the performance of rehabilitation and autism centers.

While referring to a small number of special children registered with rehabilitation centres the bench said that there must be an awareness campaign as provided under the act about such institutions and healthcare facilities.

(By Ishaq Tanoli Dawn, 13, 17/09/2021)

Banking for women

AS the old adage goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. How far the new State Bank initiative — ‘Banking on Equality: Reducing the Gender Gap in Financial Inclusion’ — will help remove the barriers to women’s access to banking and financial services, only time will tell. Yet the first of its kind mainstreaming effort for the financial sector, which introduces a gender lens in our banking practices, is creditable. The policy aims to boost the number of active women-transaction bank accounts from the existing 14.5m to around 20m by 2023 and increase female participation in the workforce of financial institutions from 13pc to 20pc by 2024. In the given circumstances, the targets seem ambitious. But these are achievable with a little bit of push from the central bank and increased use of technology.

Improved gender diversity in financial institutions, creation of women desks at bank branches to facilitate female clients and the development of women-centric products and services as envisaged in the policy should largely take care of supply-side barriers. The collection of gender-disaggregated data and institutionalisation of a policy forum on gender at the State Bank can push banks to meet policy targets. The recent extension of the facility to open bank accounts digitally to resident Pakistanis should help boost the financial inclusion of women. It is not clear if these initiatives have done away with any condition for the ‘validation’ of a male family member for an adult woman to become part of the banking system. If it hasn’t, it should be dismantled immediately.

Currently, women are disproportionately under-served by the country’s banking system. Reports show that women can be forced to move towards informal means to meet their borrowing and savings needs. A State Bank survey showed only 5pc women savers used formal channels in 2015 and the Pakistan Microfinance Review 2019 put the total number of female borrowers at just 3.8m. Little wonder then that the World Bank in a 2018 report strongly underscored the importance of always keeping women at the centre of financial inclusion since their access to a secure and private means of savings and financing is closely linked to their social empowerment and enables them to contribute positively to economic growth, and creates opportunities for them. Thus, President Arif Alvi was spot on when he said that opening bank accounts for women was just one way of financial inclusion. It would open up avenues for them to access credit, payments, insurance and other financial services at an affordable price. Bridging the gender gap in financial inclusion will be challenging since the causes go beyond access to services and are rooted in social values and norms. Nonetheless, the shift from gender-blind and gender-neutral practices to women-specific efforts envisaged by the new State Bank policy should go a long way in empowering them economically.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 20/09/2021)

Breast cancer awareness

LIKE so many other issues relating to women’s health in Pakistan, breast cancer is not a subject of serious discussion in the country, largely on account of social taboos. Breast cancer mortality rates in Pakistan are said to be the highest in Asia. The extent of its prevalence can be gauged by the fact that at least 90,000 new cases are diagnosed every year in the country and, annually, some 40,000 women succumb to it. This might just be the tip of the iceberg when one considers that most women are reluctant to talk about any abnormality in their breasts or to seek medical assistance. It is tragic that a large number of women should succumb to a largely treatable — especially if detected early — disease just because they were ashamed to talk about it with doctors.

October is observed across the world as the month of breast cancer awareness. It is among the most prevalent cancers in the world, and the most common in women. According to the WHO, breast cancer caused around 685,000 deaths worldwide in 2020 and 2.3m women were diagnosed with it. Though awareness about the disease in Pakistan has witnessed an improvement in urban areas where there is greater education and better health facilities, not much has changed for the rural poor who can only turn to understaffed and ill-equipped dispensaries or Basic Health Units for medical assistance. A number of public and private buildings have been lit up pink this month, while the government has also launched an awareness campaign via a recorded message on mobile networks. But that is not enough. The government should launch a nation-wide free screening campaign in collaboration with private hospitals, at least in the month of October, for the early detection of new cases. The assurance that female medical staff would conduct the screening may encourage more women to get themselves checked. A national cancer registry is also needed so that all cases become part of the public record for effective policymaking.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 21/10/2021)

Women of power

She enters a building, heads to the big wall near the entrance with all the electricity meters installed and gets right down to work. Putting on her plastic gloves, she brings out her cell phone. But first she wipes clean with her finger the dust off the screen so that the reading becomes clear for her to photograph. The picture will be printed on your electricity bill.

Meet K-Electric's female meter reader. She has been around for four years but is being noticed more now as there are several others like her joining the ranks.

Farzana Kausar was 39 when she joined the utility four years ago. 'Not possible', 'You won't be able to', 'It's not something females do' and 'What are people going to say?' ... She ignored all the negatives to embrace the positives, but only in life. If you speak to her about the positives and negatives at work, she would tell you that it has to do with current. "Current that enters the circuit is positive current and current that is moving away from the circuit is negative." That is it!

Farzana belongs to Lyari. "Four years ago, our first batch only had four females. I joined because I wanted to do something different," she told Dawn. "And I did not find any opposition from my people. Lyari is quite enlightened and supportive that way," she said.

A female meter reader from Lyari says she has been given motorcycle riding, self-defence training

About her training days, she informed that besides receiving training on how to do readings, she was also taught how to ride a motorcycle along with getting some training in martial arts and self-defence. "Well, at the time, there were several threats to KE personnel and I had to learn to defend myself in case of any untoward incident," she said, adding that that said, nothing like that ever happened to her.

"I am all set now. And seeing me do my work with so much ease and also earn a respectable livelihood has prompted more women to follow me," she said.

Forty-year-old Nazia Murad is another female meter reader working with the power utility. She was part of the second batch that included nine women.

"After my initial training, which lasted about one week, I went around different areas for meter readings with my seniors for a month. Now I am myself a senior and usually handling work on my own, unless we are taken along and guide a junior. We are taking readings for some 20 days after we are given a schedule from our IT department. Then we go area-wise. A group goes out together and then each reader is given an area to cover following which we regroup and leave," she said.

She said she is glad that the new meters are not placed that high. "At five feet, we can easily do readings but higher than that would be an issue," she said. "It is also better that the new meters have been installed outside homes. That way we don't have to disturb consumers to open gates or doors for us. Though they still come outside for a chat if they notice us and if they are facing some issues with their bills or anything," she said.

"But consumers are also pleasantly surprised to find a woman doing the meter reading. Some also inquire from us about the joining procedure. We tell them about the required qualifications, etc," she said, adding that she herself is a graduate and that there is also scope for advancement and promotions in her job.

Nazia said that the third batch of meter readers getting training from KE included four to five women and the most recent fourth batch had as many as 11 women. They are all stationed at various centres in Lyari, Korangi, Landhi, Gulistan-i-Jauhar, Surjani Town, Malir, she said.

Going a step further, the power utility, recently, also started a programme, 'Roshni Baji', who are raising awareness about general safety, electrical safety, rain safety, power theft hazards and energy conservation within communities. These women are said to be Pakistan's first certified women electricians. KE has also inducted five women grid operating officers to take on more challenging roles in the transmission of power.
(By Shazia Hasan Dawn, 13, 23/11/2021)

SHC accepts Arzoo's plea to live with parents, practise Islam

The Sindh High Court on Wednesday allowed an underage girl, who had contracted free-will marriage last year after converting from Christianity to Islam, to leave a shelter home and live with her parents.

While allowing the application of Arzoo seeking reunion with her parents after spending over a year in the shelter home, a two-judge bench headed by Justice Mohammad Karim Khan Agha directed her parents not to pressurise their daughter to change her religion, allow the girl to adopt her own life choices and not cause any physical or mental harm to her.

The bench further asked the girl's parents to produce her before the SHO concerned after every three months until she reached the age of 18 years and the police officer must certify that she was well-treated by her parents and communicate the same to the SHC through its member inspection team (MIT).

In November 2020, the SHC had sent the girl to a shelter home after finding her marriage invalid for being underage as she had refused to go with her parents and insisted on going to her 'husband's house.

Stops her from meeting putative husband

The SHC had observed that prima facie it was not possible for her to enter into a legally valid marriage under the Sindh Marriages Restraint Act (SCMRA) 2013 since she was under 18 and directed the police to take action against her alleged husband Syed Ali Azhar and others responsible for the underage marriage after a medical board had confirmed that she was around 14 years of age at the time of marriage.

On Tuesday, Arzoo sent an application to the SHC from the shelter home seeking permission to go with her parents after pondering for over a year on her life choices.

When the bench took up the matter for hearing on Wednesday, the girl was produced in court and her lawyer Nizar Tanoli argued that since her client had converted to Islam she cannot be returned to her parents as they were Christians.

However, Jibran Nasir, the counsel for the parents of the girl, opposed this plea. When the judges asked Arzoo whether she had converted to Islam of her own freewill, she replied in the affirmative.

Replying to another question of the bench, she said that she was willing to return to her parents' home.

The girl's parents were also present during the proceedings and they said that they would welcome their daughter back to their home and undertook that they would not pressurise her to change her religion from Islam and would allow her to practise her religion freely and adopt her own life choices in this respect.

They assured the bench that they would not cause any harm to their daughter for converting to Islam and for initially deciding not to go with them.

"In the light of the above, we hereby direct that Mst. Arzoo Fatima be returned from Panah shelter home to her parents' home where she will reside and be looked after by them," the court order said.

The bench further said that the girl would not be allowed to meet her alleged husband, who had been facing criminal proceedings under the SCMRA and for the offence of rape.

Initially, Arzoo had petitioned the SHC seeking a restraining order against the registration of a kidnapping case against her spouse, in-laws and others by her family at the Frere police station and in October last year the high court had directed the police not to make any arrest and provide protection to the couple.

However, the parents of the girl submitted that she was 13 and had forcibly been converted to Islam after being abducted. Thereafter, the incident of alleged abduction, conversion and underage marriage had sparked protests from human rights bodies and thus, the SHC had ordered constitution of a medical board to determine her age.

(By Ishaq Taanoli Dawn, 13, 23/12/2021)