

## PAKISTAN'S WOMEN AT FOREFRONT OF GIVING RURAL GIRLS EDUCATION

**ISLAMABAD:** For years, Fatima would wake up in the morning and dream of going to school but her hopes for an education were crushed. Rather than joining her two brothers in school, from the age of five Fatima would set off with her mother to work in the fields of their village in Bahawalpur district of Punjab, in east Pakistan. "I wanted to go to the school and wanted to become a teacher, so that I could help other girls," Fatima, now aged seven, said in a Skype interview from her home.

The daughter of a laborer, Fatima seemed destined to a cycle of illiteracy and poverty and to remain one of more than 13 million girls in Pakistan to never see inside a classroom. Nearly half of Pakistan's 53 million children aged 5-16 are out of school and 55 percent of those are girls. Pakistan has the third largest number of out-of-school girls in the world, a fact that hit headlines globally in 2012 after Taliban militants shot 14-year-old schoolgirl and education advocate Malala Yousafzai, now a Nobel Peace prize laureate.

Now amid this largely patriarchal society, Pakistani women, be they educated campaigners or illiterate mothers, are at the forefront of advocating for girls' right to school. Fatima's luck changed when local community workers visited her family and, after several meetings, backed her mother and convinced her father to send her to the nearby school, breaking the traditional norm of keeping girls at home. "My wish came true and I was able to go to school. I like to play with my friends. Teachers are very kind and they take care of me," Fatima said, her dark brown eyes glistening with joy.

She became one of 73,000 children enrolled in school due to a joint project launched in 2013 by Alif Ailaan - an education reform campaign funded by the UK Department for International Development but run by Pakistanis - and local non-profit organization, Rural Support Programs Network (RSPN). The project has helped raise awareness in rural Pakistan about the importance of learning as well as mobilize communities to demand quality education for their children from their political representatives and education department officials.

### Women campaigning for girls

Despite a constitutional article guaranteeing the right of every child in Pakistan to a free education, social researchers blame poverty, a conservative culture and run-down school facilities for the decision by many poor families to keep their children, especially their daughters, from school. RSPN says much of the success of the project is owed to its grass-roots community

and village campaigners who use creative ways to get their message across such as public walks through the villages to raise awareness and coordinating with religious leaders to spread the word. Social workers report that the most frequently reported reason for girls not attending school is their parents' unwillingness to send them due, citing difficult access to schools, poverty, and cultural sensitivities.

A recent Oxfam report said 11 percent of young girls in Pakistan are married before the age of 15, jeopardizing their rights to health, education and protection and fathers needed to be convinced that education was a better path. Uzma Nazir, a campaigner in Bahawalpur, found that in one case she had to appeal to a father's sense of religious duty as well as his guilt over spending excess cash on tobacco. "If you could afford to smoke daily and have enough money for Dish TV, then it meant that you could afford to pay for your children's educational expenses," Nazir said she told him.

She added that every Muslim man and woman had the responsibility for gaining an education. In the end she helped him enrol his three daughters in school. Another effective argument that campaigners use are the economic advantages to an education. It wasn't hard to convince Sukhaan Mai to send all her seven daughters and son to school. Mai, who lives in a village 40 km (25 miles) from Dera Ghazi Khan city in central Pakistan, earns 8,000 Pakistani rupees (\$76) a month, working as a day labourer, picking cotton and harvesting wheat in peak season.

Her biggest wish was for a better life for her children, which included sending them all to school, especially her physically-challenged daughter Memoona, 12. "If my children will get an education there will be so many benefits in their future for better livelihood and they will gain the knowledge about good and bad," said Mai in a Skype interview from her home. According to the United Nation's International Labour Organization (ILO), about 75 percent of Pakistani working women aged 15 and above were in the agricultural sector in 2010-2011 where working conditions were harsh and the wages were low.

Global evidence suggests that one additional year of schooling can increase a woman's earning by 10 to 20 percent. So far, the project has raised the awareness of nearly 250,000 people about the value of education. Rural communities have also lobbied for improvements in 741 schools - many of which were functioning without electricity, had no drinking water, and were missing toilets and boundary walls. But social workers say there is still much work to be done.—Reuters



**MUMBAI:** Indian gay rights activists celebrate after the country's Supreme Court agreed to review a decision which criminalizes gay sex, in Mumbai yesterday. — AFP

# INDIA COURT TO REVIEW LAW CRIMINALIZING GAYS

## COLONIAL ERA LAW MAKES HOMOSEXUALITY ILLEGAL

**NEW DELHI:** India's top court yesterday said it will review a decision over whether to uphold a colonial-era law that criminalizes gay sex in a victory for homosexual rights campaigners at a time when the nation is navigating a path between tradition and modernity. The Supreme Court asked a five-judge bench to examine whether the 1860 law, which imposes a 10-year sentence for gay sex, is constitutional, a lawyer for a gay rights group said. "It is definitely a move forward," said lawyer Anand Grover as activists gathered outside the court cheered.

This was the last legal avenue for campaigners seeking to use the courts to strike down the law. Otherwise, any future decisions to lift the ban will rest with the country's politicians who are largely conservative and oppose any changes. The Supreme Court made a surprise ruling in 2013 that reinstated a ban on gay sex.

That decision ended a four-year period of decriminalization that helped bring homosexuality into the open. After the hearing a group of gay rights activists outside the court sang: "We will be successful." Human rights group Amnesty International India welcomed the court's review, saying the law puts homosexuals under physical, mental and legal threat.

"The Supreme Court has another chance to correct a grave error," Amnesty said. National surveys show about three-quarters of Indians disapprove of homosexuality and are deeply traditional about other issues of sexuality such as sex outside of marriage. India is one of 75 countries around the world that outlaws homosexuality, according to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. Although the law banning homosexuality is rarely enforced in India, it is used to intimidate,

harass, blackmail and extort money from homosexuals, activists say. There are no official figures on the number of cases and most go unreported as victims are too scared to report crimes to the police, fearing they will be punished too, activists say.

While the previous Congress-led government had pledged to repeal the law if it came to power again, it was crushed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in general elections in May 2014. In December, members of Modi's party, which has an overwhelming majority in the lower house of parliament, scuppered a private member's bill to scrap the law. "It is about principles of freedom enshrined in our constitution," Shashi Tharoor, the opposition Congress lawmaker who introduced the bill said. "It's time to take the government out of the bedroom." — Reuters

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