

Shaheed Benazir Bhutto: An Icon Of Women Empowerment Remembered On Her Birthday

Shazia Nizamani pays tribute to the contributions towards women empowerment made by Shaheed Benazir Bhutto on what would have been her 70th birthday



by **Shazia Nizamani** — June 21, 2023



Shaheed Benazir Bhutto would have turned 70 years old on June 21, 2023. We wish her happy birthday as she is alive in our hearts, memories and thoughts. We women owe a lot to Shaheed Benazir Bhutto. Shaheed Benazir became the first elected woman leader in a male-dominated, patriarchal society of a Muslim country by breaking gender barriers and setting a precedent for women's political participation in the country. This accomplishment itself served as an inspiration for women across Pakistan and the world.

She served two terms as prime Minister of Pakistan, in 1988–90 and again from 1993 to 1996. At 35, she became one of the youngest prime ministers in the world, and was elected prime minister barely three months after giving birth to her first child Bilawal.

She was well aware of the challenges of being a woman in politics, a completely male dominated sphere. She rightly said: "It is not easy being a woman anywhere. Moreover, for women leaders, the obstacles are greater, the demands are greater, the barriers are greater and the double standards are greater."

"As a woman leader, I thought I brought a different kind of leadership. I was interested in women's issues, in bringing down the population growth rate ... as a woman I entered politics with an additional dimension, that of a mother."

It was a proud moment for Pakistan when young Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was addressing United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995. She said: "As the first woman ever elected to head an Islamic nation, I feel a special responsibility towards all women," she stated.

Shaheed Benazir became a symbol of hope, courage and source of inspiration for women in Pakistan and across the globe. After she became Prime Minister in 1988, she gave priority to women empowerment and a new chapter in history of Pakistan was created for women in Pakistan.

Shaheed Benazir introduced several reforms to improve women's legal rights and protections. She worked towards the establishment of separate family courts to handle matters related to women, such as divorce, custody, and inheritance. She also advocated for legislation to address domestic violence.

She prioritized the establishment of maternity and child health centers across Pakistan, particularly in rural areas where healthcare facilities were limited. These centers aimed to provide essential maternal and child healthcare services, including prenatal care, safe deliveries, postnatal care, immunizations, and nutrition support. Shaheed Benazir emphasized the importance of family planning and reproductive health services. She worked towards expanding access to family planning services. She recognized that family planning played a crucial role in empowering women, reducing maternal mortality, and improving overall health outcomes.

She established the First Women Bank to cater to the financial needs of women. It was a specialized financial institution to promote economic empowerment and financial inclusion for women in Pakistan. The First Women Bank provided banking services to the specific needs of women, such as microcredit, small business loans, and financial products that cater to women entrepreneurs. The bank had a widespread network of branches across the country, with a special focus on underserved areas and rural communities. The bank also provided women with financial literacy programs, skill development, and entrepreneurship training. She also started several loan schemes for women entrepreneurs.

Shaheed Benazir, during her first tenure as prime minister which lasted for 18 months, reserved a five per cent quota for women in public sector jobs to ensure employment opportunities were made available to women. This was beginning of a larger goal towards women empowerment. This encouraged women and opened a window for women for employment. She established women's studies centers at five universities in Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore, Quetta, and Peshawar.

In 1993, then Prime Minister Benazir inaugurated the first women's police station. The purpose of women police stations was to address the specific needs and concerns of women, as well as to provide a safe and supportive and women friendly environment for women to report crimes and seek justice. The women police stations had female police officers, including investigators and support staff. This initiative was implemented to encourage women to come forward to report cases of crime against women who may have felt uncomfortable or hesitant to approach male police officers. After the establishment of the first women police station in Karachi, several other cities in Pakistan have also set up similar women police stations to provide a gender-sensitive approach to law enforcement and to empower women in seeking justice.

The Lady Health Workers Program (LHW) program was introduced in 1994 by Benazir. It was a significant intervention in public health initiatives in Pakistan. The programme was established to improve maternal and child health and provide primary healthcare services at the door step at community level, especially in rural areas.

For the first time ever, a ministry for women's affairs was established. The ministry aimed to address issues related to women's rights, social welfare, and gender equality. It focused on

promoting policies and initiatives to improve the status and well-being of women in Pakistan. Working Women Hostel was established in Islamabad to provide safe and affordable accommodation for working women who come to the capital city for employment opportunities.

Shaheed Benazir was well aware of modern and global needs of information technology. Her government established computer centres and many other vocational training centres for women.

Shaheed Benazir worked on land reforms by giving ownership of agricultural land to landless women farmers. Under this reform, landless women farmers were given the opportunity to obtain ownership of agricultural land. The intention was to empower women economically and socially by granting them access to land.

Under her leadership, women were appointed in the superior judiciary and other public institutions. It was one of the major milestones towards women empowerment. Because of these initiatives, now we can see many women in public and private institutions and they were included in policy and decision making level.

Due to limited space, many initiatives cannot be included in a short list of the achievements of Shaheed Benazir in her two short tenures as Prime Minister. While her first term lasted for 18 months and second lasted for three years, her time in office geared Pakistan towards being a modern, pluralistic, democratic and gender inclusive society. It was a big shift in the political and social landscape, as it was happening after almost a decade of military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law, his Islamization campaign, Jihadi culture, political and civil rights suppression, discrimination against women through anti-women legislation (Hudood ordinance, *chaddar* and *char diwari* etc) and so on.

Despite threats to her life, she decided to return to her people, to save her country from terrorism and democracy, and the Constitution. We the women of Pakistan pay tribute to Shaheed Benazir on her birthday.



Shazia Nizamani