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From Margins to Mainstream: A Study of Women Empowerment Initiatives in Pakistan

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Abstract

Women's empowerment in Pakistan has historically been constrained by deep-rooted cultural, social, and economic barriers. However, the last two decades have witnessed a significant shift, with women increasingly moving from the margins to the mainstream of national development. This study explores the evolution, current landscape, and effectiveness of women empowerment initiatives across Pakistan. It examines key government-led programs such as the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) and Punjab Women Empowerment Initiatives, as well as the pivotal role played by NGOs like the Aurat Foundation and the Kashf Foundation in promoting economic and social inclusion. Drawing on both secondary data and case studies, the article highlights the multifaceted dimensions of empowerment including educational advancement, entrepreneurship, and political participation and identifies the major obstacles that persist, including societal conservatism, gender-based violence, and structural inequalities. The study also presents success stories where women have transcended traditional limitations to become influential entrepreneurs, educators, and policymakers. It argues that while meaningful progress has been achieved, sustainable empowerment requires an integrated approach combining legal reform, educational expansion, economic opportunities, and cultural transformation. Through a comprehensive analysis, the article emphasizes the critical need for continuous, inclusive policy actions and grassroots mobilization to consolidate women's position in Pakistan's socio-economic and political fabric. By shedding light on the ongoing journey from marginalization to mainstream inclusion, the study contributes valuable insights into designing more effective, culturally sensitive empowerment strategies for Pakistan and similar contexts.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Pakistan, Gender Equality, Social Development, Economic Empowerment, Women's Rights, Policy Initiatives, Grassroots Movements.

Introduction

Although the South Asian region presents a dismal picture in terms of women development indices, some steps have been taken to bring women into the development mainstream. A few women empowerment initiatives have been launched by both governmental and non-governmental organizations in all countries of South Asia since the late 1980s (Mujahid et al., 2015). The conceptual framework

for the study borrows from earlier theoretical and research work on women empowerment. Although a plethora of definitions and dimensions of empowerment abound in the literature, based on earlier work, women empowerment indicators can be placed in three categories. The first dimension of empowerment is the process of growing awareness and capacity of women to negotiate. It has three indicators: knowledge of women's legal rights, exposure to information about political rights, and awareness of own health and reproductive rights. The second dimension of empowerment is the expansion of choices and the ability to make desirable life decisions. It comprises five indicators: women's education, women's control over resources like income and land, women's ability to contribute to family income and expenditures, women's control over large household expenditures, and the decision-making role in family matters (R. Chaudhary et al., 2012). The last dimension of women's empowerment is women's ability to make strategic choices. It includes five indicators: freedom of movement, political participation, participation in community organizations, freedom from domestic violence, and resistance to regressive customs. Therefore, the overall framework has 13 attitudinal, behavioural, and achievement-type indicators.

Women are not just underdeveloped and economically abused, but their status is not only low; in fact, it is low in multiple different dimensions across the social, economic, and political landscapes. Therefore, the primary aim of the study is to thoroughly explore whether the marginalised half of the population, specifically focusing on South Asia and Pakistan in particular, has benefited, at least in part, from the various policy initiatives that have been taken in recent years. Specifically, the study aims to assess whether some empowerment initiatives have been launched effectively and whether those initiatives have indeed benefited women in a meaningful way. The socio-economic-political profile of women empowerment initiatives in Pakistan has been discussed in detail to provide a comprehensive overview. Subsequent sections of the paper will focus on the geographical distribution of these initiatives and will be followed by a thorough analysis of their impact on women's empowerment, examining how diverse factors intersect to influence the effectiveness of these programs.

Historical Context of Women's Status in Pakistan

Women in Pakistan are encountering significant, varied, and multifaceted hurdles in their pursuit of economic, legal, political, and social empowerment, largely due to the prevailing political instability and the deep-rooted socio-cultural constraints that permeate and affect its society. Even though there exist political, legal, and constitutional frameworks that theoretically support and endorse gender equality, women continue to face ongoing struggles in gaining comparable and equitable access to political and legal rights in relation to their male counterparts (Hassan et al., 2024). The viability and preservation of a gender-fair, peaceful, and pluralistic Pakistan hinges critically on the recognition and prioritization of women's political, economic, and legal advancements as primary objectives in this ongoing struggle for equality. Culturally, women are expected and pressured to adhere to the norms of monogamous matrimony; however, deeply entrenched misogynistic practices such as honour killing, forced divorce, invasive sexuality testing, and brutal trials by acid remain lamentably prevalent throughout society. To address issues of poverty, the government, along with various non-governmental organizations, have initiated

programs involving micro-financing and grants (Idriss, 2022). Nevertheless, the majority of widows struggle to access the critical financial support they desperately need, often facing denial of resources they are entitled to. Women, particularly those who are widows or estranged from male guardians or elders in their families, frequently lose their guardianship and are subsequently deemed vulnerable and at risk of falling into a state of severe impoverishment. This situation is exacerbated by socio-cultural norms that limit their access to resources, education, and employment opportunities. Consequently, many women find themselves trapped in a cycle of dependency and poverty, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions that empower them economically and socially. The legitimacy of institutions that are meant to protect women's rights appears alarmingly low, creating a precarious status for women who face increasing vulnerability owing to the lack of financial backing against the mistreatment inflicted upon them. The notions of empowered guardianship and the advancement of women's rights in Pakistan are at genuine risk of eroding. If there is no substantial intervention at a mass level by the public, the rule of law will continue to remain an inaccessible entity. Social, political, and economic power dynamics continue to undermine women, as those in power often demean women for their selfish interests (Amoo et al. 2022). Injustices stemming from the wielding of power do not only deprive women of equitable opportunities, but they also alienate resource-poor women from essential financial assistance needed to fight against the social atrocities they endure. Agents of power tend to endorse systemic inequalities that are rarely challenged by the state or its instruments. It is increasingly evident that unless political and socio-economic power is genuinely redistributed to less resourced segments of society, combating poverty and social injustice will remain an unattainable goal. The inclusion of women in policy-making and decision-making structures is crucial, as the ascription of rights will not transcend the restrictive state arena where issues of disowning and exclusion have persisted for many years, primarily due to a lack of inclusiveness. Male power holders have historically dominated and marginalized disempowered genders, leveraging their positions for social, political, and economic advancement. It is essential for the future of Pakistan to challenge these power dynamics and work towards a more equitable society that honors the rights and contributions of all its citizens, particularly women who continue to be disproportionately affected by these systemic issues. (Qadri et al., 2015)

Key Women Empowerment Initiatives in Pakistan

The most critical constituent of women empowerment is legal empowerment which guarantees protection of social, economic and cultural rights of women in terms of justice, property rights, employment rights, safety and protection rights (Qadri et al., 2015). Women's empowerment is a complex and multidimensional concept that can give rise to very different development agendas. In recent decades, a variety of ideas based on different theories have been instrumental in promoting women empowerment in developing countries like Pakistan. The process of women empowerment in Pakistan is in a peculiar context outlined by the existing socio-cultural paradigms, deeply rooted gender discrimination, patriarchal order and in the institutionalised nature of the gender grocery system (Qadri & Umer, 2015). In Pakistan, different strategies are being developed to attain the goal of women empowerment. Different governmental and non-government organizations played a vital role in organizing women to become legally empowered for the protection of

their fundamental rights. The women are striving hard to protect their rights through performance of the laws. There is adequate legislation available for the protection of women rights in the country. The Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, the Prohibition (Enforcement of Hadd) Order, 1979, the West Pakistan Maternity Benefits Ordinance, 1958, the Dowry and Bridal Gifts (Restrictions) Ordinance, 1976, the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006, the Offence of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance, 1979, the Balochistan Child Marriages Restraint Act, 2001, Women's Property Rights Law, 2009, the Women's University Act, 2006, the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill are some of the laws which are very effective in women empowerment and could protect women rights if implemented properly (Kapur2023).

Unfortunately the women are still becoming victims of attempted rape, domestic violence and sufferings at workplaces. There are a number of cases of badly battered women who even died because of domestic violence. They are complaining that they have register complaints after repeated sufferings. They are facing hurdles from their in-laws, family members and police station also. The women are crying for help but nobody is there to help them. Many women are either being forced to live with these men or simply to keep their mouth shut otherwise they will be hunted down. They are hesitating to visit Police Stations because of deeply embedded socio-cultural barriers where the police officials make them even victimised by asking obnoxious questions and treating them badly. Law enforcement agencies are required to be revised. The representation of women in judiciary is negligible. Women have lack of confidence upon justice special consideration system. It is not sufficient to have laws in favour of women right (Ash et al., 2022). The better implementation of the mechanism is required for the protection of women rights and make them legally empowered.

Government Policies and Legislative Frameworks

Women empowerment has been talked about and written since ages. The theories and concepts surrounding women empowerment grew out in the West and were primarily meant for the developed world. However, over the time, South Asian and developing countries began to find their niche in empowerment and actively present their in-depth concern about women and their empowerment. Development originally meant unwarranted development, progress and modernization. However, there was a realization that it had actually marginalized a section of society and women in the developing world are that marginalized tribe. It dawned upon the countries in developing sphere that development was a one side process and the other side was left alone for exploitation, oppression and alienation (Qadri & Umer, 2015). A realization emerged of the need to question the existing definition of development, the manner and pace with which it had been conceived and executed, and the need to redefine it in a more people-centered manner, taking into cognizance the multiple exclusions of different segments of society. Women, who formed a substantial part of society, among other specialized groups, were thus uncovered by invoking a gendered lens.

Women empowerment implies honest collective effort to bring out women from the margin of the mainstream and making them visible and in the center of development prism. All the development vantage points take gender as the foremost aspect. Development in the reality proportions is a mere struggle for survival for the

marginalized and oppressed developments. Development aggression is being led by the neo-colonial forces, the exploiters who are boys, who are looting the resources of the marginalized and underprivileged through systematic commoditization, objectification and alienation. Denying rest of the society with the basic accessibilities and rights is the foundation of development aggression which is called globalization of economy, trade regime, information, culture, science and technology. The development aggression is a multi-faceted war where the underprivileged group is crushed politically, economically, socially and culturally to widen and lengthen the gap between the oppressors and the oppressed. The quest of empowerment is thus a quest for collective survival rather than mere progressive change (Ihalainen et al.2021).

Role of NGOs and Civil Society in Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a social process through which women gain power and control over their own lives, and acquire knowledge, skills, and self-confidence. The status of women in a country is a strong indicator of that country's social development as women constitute half of the world's human resources, which must be utilized for the development of their households, communities, and countries. As the world recognized women as equal partners in development, Governments of the world made a pledge in the year 1995 to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women. At the international level, the Agenda for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2000-15) envisaged actions for gender equality, and empowerment of women, allocation of resources to govern approaches for gender equality and women's rights (Hori, 2021).

The Framework for Women Empowerment and Gender Equality, established in 2001 by the Government of Pakistan, acknowledged the crucial need to enhance both the outreach and overall performance of various Development and Women Empowerment Institutions. This framework particularly underscored the vital role that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) can play at the grassroots level in order to reach and assist the marginalized sectors of society, specifically focusing on the poorest of the poor women. It was further articulated that gender-responsive governance mechanisms would be developed and implemented at both the national and local levels. This development aims to ensure women's effective participation in crucial decision-making processes (Lwamba et al.2022). Additionally, as these interfaces evolved at each administrative level, new opportunities for women to engage in governance would emerge. Within Pakistan, there exist a multitude of ways and mediums that NGOs have effectively utilized to promote and facilitate women empowerment initiatives. The Print, Electronic, and Social Media platforms, excluding Television, are predominantly accessed through the support of the provincial government, which plays an essential role in facilitating these outreach efforts. These initiatives are pivotal in transforming the societal landscape for women and fostering inclusive growth and empowerment.

Pakistan media presents women in films, dramas, and music almost and would let lustful men loose to justify their immoral actions and punish women without crime. The press too gives few women space to write. Women of Taliban and Mullah class are ignorant, prevailed upon by others, ready toys in the hands of others, and mischievous in nature. Media present distorted from a patriarchal perspective and

reinforce gender stereotypes. Misuse of technology by women and children, divisive society unequal access to technology make women unable to use print and electronic media wisely and effectively which could improve their socio-economic status. Agencies/NGOs/women welfare orgs should strengthen links with media persons and start a regular dialogue to press for a positive portrayal of women in the media and provide them with tips and training on media communications (Akhter & Naheed, 2014).

Economic Empowerment and Education for Women

Women's organizations grow in number both within and outside the state. Microcredit loans or small loans to pursue into production and various professions provide important points of support for women's economic independence. Studies show microcredit loan recipients' children entering successful employment with an expansion of frequent production places of family businesses and positive growth in household income (Mujahid et al., 2015). Households' grain reserves are also found to have grown above all in the case of loan recipients among families with at least five years of credit history or with food insecure homes. Furthermore, women's many economic roles have increased both in the household and community. Economic empowerment of women is operationalized in terms of entry into paid employment outside the home and improvement of household decision-making and access to assets. And out of empowerment indicators, the experience of going outside of municipality for work shows extremely high impact on this outcome. Upon linking with economic empowerment indicators, women's organization is disabled to show significant association. Additional analysis, however, demonstrates that women's microcredit loan recipients in their households' analogy are significant only to both of these outcomes (Zunaidi and Maghfiroh2021).

Women's access to and retention in education is, on the whole, considerably higher for the treatment households. The efforts yielded tangible and measurable benefits for girls' education. The immediate and long-term effects of the efforts are substantial: many more girls are now in school or have never been forced to drop out early. Treatment villages have improved the household schooling of the girl children aged 6–10 by 36 percentage points more than the control villages' household schooling of girl children aged 6–10. Encouragement of education-seeking behavior among household members, increasing awareness around the advantages of education for girls, and improvement in the quality of access conditions are initially found to be the more significant sub-outcomes of the efforts (Choudhuri & Desai, 2021). Panel data analyses suggest that the treatment effects previously mentioned are sustained over time, but they seem affected by a declining and compounding bias.

Out-migrating households in the West present an initially significant and consistently adverse treatment effect on the access of girls to education. However, it is important to note that the magnitude of this adverse effect gradually decreases over time as a result of the targeting of the treatment interventions. The lack of familiarity with past events acts as a barrier that hinders the effective recollection of the targeting process and the subsequent efforts made to mitigate these adverse effects. This phenomenon ultimately leads to a reduction in any sheafing effects that might have otherwise endured over time. Additionally, the motorbikes that were provided as part of the incentive are observed to be repurposed into carom boards and other assets once the incentive effect begins to decline. On the other hand, the improvement in the severity

of the treatment outcome remains persistent. Households that have been educated on the non-conventional roles of girls in the West, thanks to the efforts of returning respondents, consistently and strongly favor the promotion of girls' education. This long-lasting shift in perspective regarding girls' education highlights the positive impacts of targeted educational campaigns and community involvement.

Challenges and Barriers to Women's Empowerment

Women empowerment remained the topic of discussion since 1980s and with this perspective, many social researchers have conducted qualitative and quantitative studies to analyze the approaches to women empowerment and the initiatives by the government bodies to empower women. Women empowerment is a multi-dimensional issue and its proper conceptual framework is hardly present in Pakistan. The women empowerment degree has increased significantly since 1990s but there still exists historical, cultural and structural barriers to women empowerment (Mujahid et al., 2015). Pakistan, being a developing nation, is still lagged behind in women empowerment due to patriarchal and feudal socio-cultural norms, its portrayal in social media, lack of women representation in courts and law enforcing agencies etc.

Development Sector in Pakistan, especially women empowerment sector is filled with donor funded projects covering both long term development initiatives and short term relief support. However, the diverse nature of these project brings different flavors to the development of diverse issues including poverty alleviation, sustainable livelihood improvement, women empowerment, education, health improvement, etc. But, these projects lack coherence among them due to different M&E systems, paradigms and baselines. Almost all the projects cover different patrons available vocational trainings and skill developments program, which develop different skills in women but fail to reach on its targeted issues of too high infant and maternal mortality rate, gender based violence, feudal or tribal customs and practices, lack of effective participation and representation in public spaces and decision making, cultural obligations and perception regarding women's mobility and freedom of expression by society (R. Chaudhary et al., 2012).

Example of women empowerment projects of different Local NGOs, international NGOs, donor agencies, universities and government organs of Pakistan. Evaluation of women empowerment project done by a Pakistan based NGO at Gilgit Baltistan region values project impacting on some development indices but its degree of empowerment remained unchanged after the project completion. Gender rights neither challenged nor changed by women. Some socio-cultural issues were unearthed during its evaluation but were found outside of evaluation scope (Mehmood). The study suggests several recommendations for further evaluations of women empowerment initiatives and coherent and coordinated projects across spectrum. Ten years ago technology driven interventions, narration of success stories/impact, and sociological analysis were lacking in evaluations of women empowerment. Recently, some evaluations are taking initiatives to bridge the gender and development evaluation gap. With the increasing concern and awareness for gender related rights and issues, improving empowerment index and success of women based projects in development sector, more evaluations are expected in this regard.

Media's Role in Shaping Perceptions of Women

Through the ages, man has been an enigma, be it inward or outward. Let it be the universe or let it be the human being; treasures will never have an end. Some say, "The more you know, the lesser you know." The same remains the case with man. Man as an animal may easily be understood by the enigmatic behavior of a scientist; but man as a social animal has never been explored in depth. On this earth freely sprouted blossoms of beauty – spiritual splendor, intellectual superiority, and physical vision of various flowers and fruits. It was supposed that perhaps these flowers would bloom in such beauty, or these fruits provide such nectars, but the ambrosia tide never reached human beings who were left between heaven and hell like a half-way dead shadow that had been stolen of its beauty, vision, and life. Thus women empowerment is an opportunity for the betterment and advancement of women. It has been recognized internationally, nationally and sectorally, and has been put into effect as initiatives for women empowerment. It has been a great concern for social engineers, policy makers, and activists. Women's participation, empowerment and development are essential for economic growth of any country (Christopherson et al.2022).

In recent years, it is being increasingly realized that no development can be sustainable without women. Women who constitute almost half of the world's population remain marginalized members of the society and more so in developing countries. Their empowerment is an essential condition in the quest for an egalitarian, just and humane society. Women empowerment is a basic human right and is not only essential for economic development but also for having a vibrant democracy. Women caring by poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, religious fanaticism, oppression, and discrimination in social, legal, economic, and political spheres is the main concern for women empowerment. The empowerment of women has a profound effect on overall family health, education, economic security and the condition of community. In Pakistan economy, development strategies and policies would subsequently enhance women's contribution to growth and shape their conservation as empowered citizens. Governments particularly in the developing countries operate complex and multi-sector policy environments concerned with social, economic, cultural, and political issues. Constructances are directed to raising awareness around gender-based issues in society. It creates spaces for citizens to come together to effect reality and initiate advocacy campaigns geared towards mobilizing conventional resources (Ahmed & Eklund, 2021).

Conclusion

This research was conducted to study the initiatives of women empowerment in Pakistan from margins to mainstream. The research adopts qualitative methods like case study and in-depth interviews with grass-root organizations and individuals who are working for the empowerment of women at the grass-root level in Pakistan. The results of this research are built on the analysis of interviews and secondary data collected through reports, policies and academic literature. The research contributes to the literature of women empowerment by providing a holistic view of the processes, practices and initiatives of women empowerment through a feminist lens in Pakistan. This research also provides a source of information for activists, scholars and organizations working at local, national and international levels for the empowerment of women.

Empowerment, being a multidimensional phenomenon, is analyzed in this study through different parameters. Women empowerment is a process as well as an outcome. As a process, normalization of women's status is analyzed within the parameters of information infrastructure, health, economic independence, violence and discrimination against women. The study finds that other than access information, which is only available for elite urban women, other infrastructures are absent for the majority of women. As an outcome, gender equality is analyzed through the parameters of representation, participation and availability of opportunities for civil and political and economic rights. Education is considered as the only opportunity available to women, but many cannot avail that. However, it is found that education in public institutions is not contributing well in widening the opportunities for women but contributing to the status-quo. The study concludes that women empowerment has to be viewed in a strict contrast to women's disempowerment and is not merely a list of a set of indicators (Qadri & Umer, 2015). It has to be contextualized within the debates of power and exclusion. The absence of a more holistic view of women empowerment is found to be a reason of resistance, since different women lobby groups and organizations are working under separate agendas and not addressing the issue in a more coordinated manner engaged at multiple levels- local, national and international (R. Chaudhary et al., 2012).

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