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Socio-Cultural Constraints To Women's Participation In Rural Support Programs In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

The current paper aims to inquire about the socio-cultural constraints to women's participation in National Rural Support Program (NRSP) operating in four districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa namely Charsada, Mardan, Nowshehra and Sawabi. Such restrictions to women participation in the Project Cycle i.e. *formation of women community organization, needs assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation process* in NRSP projects have been identified through collection of data from staff members of NRSP and president /manager and ordinary members of women community organizations through convenient sampling procedure through in-depth interviewing. The information obtained has been analyzed qualitatively under themes. The results show that NRSP carries out various physical infrastructure schemes through women community organizations (WCOs). The study concludes that NRSP staff members mobilize WCOs through social mobilization and social organization process; but there are various socio-cultural practices, which do not allow women to participate in developmental process. The study also identifies that these socio-cultural constraints include male domination, Purdah (veil), conventional leaders and target oriented approach of NRSP. The study suggest that for sustainability of NRSP, widespread activities of gender equality is important to overcome these constraints.

Keywords: Pakistan, Gender, Cultural Constraints, Participation, Sustainability.

تلخیص

یہ مقالہ ضلع چارسدہ، مردان، نوشہرہ اور صوابی میں جاری نیشنل رورل سپورٹ پروگرام سے متعلق ان سماجی اور ثقافتی رکاوٹوں کا احاطہ کرتا ہے جو خواتین کی اس پروگرام میں شرکت کے حوالے سے حائل رہی ہیں۔ پراجیکٹ کے مؤثر نتائج کے سلسلے میں خواتین کی شرکت کے راستے میں حائل رکاوٹیں؛ جن میں خواتین تنظیموں کا قیام، ضروریات کا تعیّن، اس سے متعلق منصوبہ بندی پھر ان کا نفاذ اور نیشنل رورل سپورٹ پروگرام پراجیکٹ کے مکمل جائزے کے ذریعے حاصل کردہ معلومات کو پراجیکٹ میں کام کرنے والے عملے، سربراہان یا منتظمین اور خواتین تنظیموں میں کام کرنے والے کارکنوں کے ذریعے سہولتی

نمونہ بندی کا طریقہ کار اپناتے ہوئے انٹرویوز کی روشنی میں اکٹھے کئے گئے ہیں۔ حاصل کردہ معلومات کے مرکزی خیالات کا کیفیتی طریقہ تحقیق کے ذریعے تجزیہ کیا گیا ہے۔ نتائج یہ بتاتے ہیں کہ نیشنل رورل سپورٹ پروگرام خواتین تنظیموں کے باہمی تعاون سے پراجیکٹ کے بنیادی ڈھانچے کی اسکیموں کو چلاتا ہے۔ یہ مطالعہ احاطہ کرتا ہے کہ عملے نے ان خواتین تنظیموں کو تنظیم سازی اور معاشرتی سطح پر ان کی اجتماع سے متعلق سرگرمیوں کو تیز تر کرنے میں مدد دی ہے لیکن بہت سارے سماجی، ثقافتی عوامل اب بھی ترقیاتی کاموں میں خواتین کی شرکت کے راستے میں حائل ہیں۔ یہ مطالعہ اس کی بھی وضاحت کرتا ہے کہ معاشرے کے اندر یہ پابندیاں مرد کی بالادستی، پردہ، روایتی سرداروں اور نیشنل رورل سپورٹ پروگرام کی ایک محدود سطح پر کام کرنے کا باعث ہیں۔ اس مطالعے کی روشنی میں یہ تجویز دی گئی ہے کہ دیہی ترقیاتی پروگرام کی پائیداری کو یقینی بنانے کے لئے ضروری ہے کہ صنفی بنیاد پر ہونے والی سرگرمیاں اور نیشنل رورل سپورٹ پروگرام کی وسیع تر سطح پر سرگرمیاں ان رکاوٹوں پر قابو پانے کے لیے از حد اہم ہیں۔

کلیدی الفاظ: پاکستان، صنف، ثقافتی رکاوٹیں، شمولیت، پائیداری۔

Introduction

Women are the essential component of society and there is increasing recognition that the goal of sustainable development cannot be realized until and unless women are involved in the development process (Khan, 2006). Women constitute half of the population of Pakistan and during the last few years, women participation in various spheres of life has increased considerably (Ram, et al. 2011). Developmental programs which do not involve women in the decision making, planning, execution and monitoring will remain unsustainable (Idrees, et al., 2008). Research studies reveal that when women were provided opportunities, they setup thousands of vibrant organizations for influencing the decision makers and planners at the national and international levels (Khan, 2006). In the developed countries like USA, Germany and UK, women have been given equal opportunities and are equal partners for achieving the goal of sustainable development (UNIFEM, 2006). Pakistani women are in disadvantageous position as compared to women in other developing nations of the region. Rural women in Pakistan lack access to basic facilities like education, health and limited role in the decision-making process .Government and Non-Governmental Organizations are striving for meaningful participation of women in the developmental process (Bari, 2000).

Now a days, the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are being considered an essential component of society. These NGOs and INOGs are working for tangible and intangible development (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). The weak performance of governmental institutions led to the emergence of NGOs to help people and communities in need. Such organizations work for the development of vulnerable and oppressed groups, ignored by

governmental organizations. These NGOs got impetus when they were encouraged by the IMF and World Bank to take part in the national development efforts (Miltin, Hickey, & Bebbington, 2006).

NGOs have been given different names in different times like "*major group; pressure group; interest group; private voluntary organization; independent voluntary sector; third sector organization* (TSOs)'' (Martens,2002:278). According to The John Hopkins, Non-profit Sector Research Project for Pakistan, NGOs/ NPOs are those organizations that are independent from the government, voluntary in nature; manage their affairs without any external influence and where membership is not obligatory (Ghaus-Pasha, Jamal, & Iqbal 2002). Similarly, Salamon & Anheier (1992) have defined NGOs as those private, independent organizations striving for the lessening of socio-economic miseries of weaker sections of society. NGOs also work for the protection of human rights, promoting education, health, human rights and promotion of democratic culture in the society. Non-governmental organizations were present since time unknown in different shapes and were named in Pakistan as *'Welfare Organizations, Voluntary Organizations, Missionary Organizations, Falahi Idare, Jirga, Panchayat, Not-For-Profit Organizations'* etc. (Hasan, & Junejo, 1999).

Charitable or philanthropic activities were started in the Indian sub-continent before partition (Pasha, Jafarey and Lohano, 2000). The main purpose of these welfare activities was to assist the government in delivery of social services like education, health, social welfare and cultural activities (Iqbal, Khan & Javed, 2004). Though Indian society was diverse in nature having Muslims, Hindus and Parsis, however, following their religious beliefs, they contributed voluntarily to help the needy and poor in their respective communities. Muslim philanthropists however, strictly follow Islamic way of teaching to help people in need (Saljuq, 2005). Sir Sayed Ahmad Khan in 1870 setup *"Committee for the Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning among Muhammadans of India''* for bringing the Muslims in to the main stream of development. After five years in 1875, he founded "Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College (MAO)". Later on MAO college became a full fledge University in 1922 and played a leading role in the independence movement (Belmekki, 2009).

Meanwhile, followers of Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan continued his mission in the West Pakistan (areas that are now part of Pakistan) and established Sindh Madrasa-tul-Islam in Karachi, Anjuman-e-Himayat-e-Islam, Lahore and Islamia College, Peshawar (Iqbal, Khan & Javed, 2004). At the same time, non-muslims also took part in welfare activities and established schools and hospitals for assisting the poor and weaker section of society (PRIA, 2001). Due to their concerted efforts, 'Edwardes Church Mission School of Peshawar (1855)', 'Jesus and Mary Convent of Sialkot' (1858) and 'St. Joseph's Convent of Karachi' were established which provided educational services to large portions of

society. These institutions primarily stressed on assisting the poor people by establishing hospitals, dispensaries, orphanages, infirmaries and seminaries. They continued their welfare efforts in post partition era of Indo Pak (Gopal, 1994). In order to streamline the activities related to religious endowments trust, laws were framed such as '*Societies Registration Act in 1860'*, followed by '*Religions Endowment Act 1863*', the '*Trust Act, 1882*' and the *Credit Societies Act,1904*' (Saljuq, 2005).

Literature Review

Historical Background of NGOs in Pakistan

Since 1947, the newly established state of Pakistan was passing through a difficult time due to various socio-economic problems. At that time, the voluntary sector helped the administration of newly established state in re-settling refugees, provision of health, education, poverty and unemployment issues (Bano, 2007).

There has been tremendous increase in the number of NGOs during 1980s due to many reasons but two of them are worthy to mention. First, due to Washington Census and its impact on economic liberalization and democratization, there has been tremendous increase in funding to NGOs which gave an impetus to NGOs operating in third world countries (Barrow & Jennings, 2001).Secondly, this model considered state as incapable, run on bureaucratic lines, while NGOs were known for their efficiency, cost effectiveness, accessibility and empowerment of the masses especially women (Dahan, Doh & Guay, 2006). As a result, such NGOs were considered as an alternate to government departments and their role was recognized as '*indigenous people's organizations*' particularly during and after the 1980s (Bagci, 2007). However, NGOs struggling towards welfare and relief operations turned to participatory development approach. As a result, the government of Pakistan also changed her policy towards NGOs and were given opportunities to work for the up-lift of marginalized section of society including women. NGOs were included in Social Action Program (SAP) which was component of the Eight Five Year Plan (SPDC, 2002). The government initiated Social Action Program on participatory development approach as joint venture of public private sector represented by NGOs and the target community. The government launched Rural Support Programs (RSPs) – adopting participatory approach – at national and provincial levels. In the establishment of these RSPs, the government followed precedents of Agha Khan Rural Support Program model, based in Northern Areas of Pakistan (Rural Support Program Network, 2010). The primary aim of RSPs was improvement in the socio-economic conditions through self-help initiatives. The National Rural Support Program (NRSP) holds largest space among all RSPs, with the goal of empowering people by community organization and mobilization of their resources to improve their socio-economic conditions (Mustafa, et al. 2000).

National Rural Support Program (NRSP)

National Rural Support Program (NRSP) was setup in 1991 by the government of Pakistan for extending help to government in service delivery using participatory development approach (Landmann & Frölich, 2013). NRSP aimed at socio-economic up-lift of the weaker sections of society, organizing communities through self-help initiatives leading the people towards sustained development (NRSP, 2015). On the basis of participatory development approach, it has set up a network of men community organizations (MCOs) and women community organizations (WCOs) for initiating developmental activities with the active participation of target communities funded by national and international donor organizations (Rural Support Program Network, 2010).

The aim of NRSP is to reduce poverty and improve the living standard of rural people through employment generation. According to the Summary of achievements as of March, 2014, '*NRSP has formed 75,338 men community organizations, 75, 257 women organizations and 10, 175 mix organizations*' (NRSP, 2014:3). NRSP activities includes ″programs in human-resource development, rural credit and enterprise development, natural-resource management, physical infrastructure, social-sector services and gender and development″(World Bank, 2007:4).

NRSP's Gender Mainstreaming Policy

Gender, according to NRSP, should be a part of all policy making, that is, in planning, execution and assessment of all development activities. NRSP is also of the view that till the hurdles that block women participation in development process are not removed, sustainable development cannot be achieved (NRSP Institute of Rural Management, 2010). NRSP encourages women to form their own community organizations to actively initiate developmental activities on their own. To make it sure, women of the targeted communities are trained in necessary skills to operate their organizations with or without the help of men. NRSP's gender mainstreaming policy aims to address the causes of underdevelopment of rural people and ensuring sustainable development. In addition, this policy also emphasizes inclusion of gender equality project cycle i.e. decision making, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of developmental interventions (NRSP, 2012).

Argument of the Study

Women – as an important section of the society – constitute half of the world population (Rahman & Naoroze, 2007). Women can play an important role in the development of society if they are provided equal opportunities in all fields of life. Women in patriarchal societies including South Asia have limited say in decision making and cannot enjoy a

status in the society like their men counterparts (Hora, 2014). Cultural values and practices do not allow women to take part in the development of their society. In addition, patriarchal structure and male dominancy has kept the role of women limited to household activities and have deprived them of access to economic resources and decision making (Jehan, 2000). Rural women of Pakistan face societal pressures while taking part in the development process. Thus, Pakistan's performance in Human Development Index 2013 is not satisfactory and is ranked at 46 out of 187 countries. Further, the country has also failed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets on education, health, human rights, employment and gender equality (UNDP, 2014). It is now admitted that goals of sustainable development cannot be realized until and unless women are involved in the development process. In this regard, Kofi Annan (Secretary General of the United Nations) stated that *"realizing our goals while discriminating against half of the human population is almost impossible*" (DFID, 2007, p.1.). Although women constitute half of the total population of Pakistan, yet they are deprived of equal opportunities to participate in national development (Ali, Ahmad & Batool, 2016). Pakistani women like other spheres of life, are also being excluded in development sectors including social services. Their participation in projects being run for their development is ambiguous due to cultural norms and rigid patriarchal structure of the society (Hassan & Azman, 2014).

The paper aims to explore the role of Women Community Organization in participatory development approach used in NRSP interventions in four districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa namely Charsada, Nowshehra, Mardan and Sawabi. The purpose was to know whether women participate in the Project Cycle i.e. formation of women community organization, needs appraisal, planning, execution and evaluation process in NRSP Projects. The paper attempts to examine the socio-cultural factors i.e. patriarchal structure, traditional leaders, Purdah (veil), misinterpretation of religion, extremism and male dominancy that inhibit women's participation in NRSP interventions.

Major Objectives of the Study

- To explore the role of Women Community Organization in participatory development programs
- To know the level of women participation in the Project Cycle
- To examine the socio-cultural factors obstructing women's participation in NRSP interventions

Methodology of the Study

As detail information was required therefore the area was stratified into 04 wards (districts) where a total of 134 women community organizations were working in the

mentioned districts. Among the total WCOs, 05% from each of the stratum was selected through convenience sampling technique that constituted 07 female organizations where 02 members (One President/General Secretary and one member from the general body) from each organization were selected. This constituted a total of 14 sample size from WCOs. Likewise, 10 staff members from each district of NRSP – both from the regional office as well as the field offices – were included. Among the regional office staff; regional program officer, head social organization section, manger monitoring and evaluation section, human resource development section, gender and development section and head engineering section were included. From the field offices in each district; district program manager, senior social organizers, social organizers both male and female, field engineers and credit officers were interviewed in this study. The sampling frame has been given below:

Details of Community Organizations in NRSP Operational Districts

	Women's Organization	
	Frequency	**5% sample**
Nowshehra	26	01
Sawabi	53	03
Mardan	33	02
Charsadda	22	01
TOTAL	**134**	**07**

Theoretical Framework

The study utilizes the Gender and Development Theory which was introduced during 1990s in the United Kingdom because of the shortcomings of Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) approach (Pieterse, 2010). Contrary to the WID approach – that focus women only, the GAD approach takes the role of both men and women into account (Baden and Reeves, 2000). Furthermore, GAD approach considers women not merely the recipient of charity, rather as agent of change (Monsen, 2010). GAD Theory stresses on balance gender relations in all fields of life, making structural transformation to ensure social justice and provide equal opportunities to all segments of society irrespective of their bio-physical being (Hussain, et al.2016). In the same way, participatory approach emphasizes that equal opportunities should be provided to both genders in the process of decision making, i.e., planning, implementation and monitoring of the developmental activities. In other words, both GAD and participatory approach believes in self-sufficiency, and participation of all recipients in the process of development at the grassroots level (Ali, 2005).

Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

Project Cycle

Formation of Women Community Organizations (WCOs)

Formation of Women Community Organizations depended on the social mobilization process carried out by NRSP staff and the cultural conditions of the target community. In District Sawabi and Nowshehra, women participated in the project cycle with the prior permission of their husband or male head of the house, while in District Charsada and Mardan formulation of women community organization was very difficult due to cultural condition i.e. *Purdah* (Veil) and threat of militancy. For formation of WCO, the female social organizer visited the community and informed women about the aims and objectives of NRSP and their role in the development of their community. They informed the local women about the need and importance of community organizations and motivated them to form their own organization for taking part in the development of their community. Furthermore, through WCO, they could raise their voices for addressing the needs of their communities. As these women could not purchase the material required for developmental activities, therefore they asked the member of the male community organization for purchasing necessary items for the developmental schemes.

In this regard, views of the staff member were recorded accordingly where one staff member expressed:

> The female social organizer approaches community to form WCO. While a male social organizer approaches the influential members in the targeted area like Malak, Khan, Imam or MPA/MNA etc., to avoid problems in interventions at local level (Female Social Organizer Sawabi).

In NRSP targeted area, women were mostly involved in household responsibilities like taking care of children, cooking, cleaning and caring for the cattle. However, there was one exception in District Sawabi where an aged woman formed WCO, and initiated a small shop with the small credit of NRSP. She started an embroidery centre where she trained the local poor women in embroidery skills. The formation of men and women community organizations started at the same time.

President of WCO stated about the formation of WCO, that:

> The NRSP staff visited our Hujra to meet people of the village, and female social organizer and community resource persons (CRPs) visited our house. The FSO informed the women – gathered inside our house – about the aims of NRSP and significance of their participation in the

> development activities. The people were also made aware of the importance and need to form women community organizations. Consequently, WCO was made, with a president and manager elected (President WCO Nowshehra).

Women's Participation in Needs Identification

The Female Social Organizer (FSO) visited the target area and met the local women to know about their needs. The women themselves listed their problems using participatory approach and prioritized problem which was the need of majority of the people in general and women in particular. The women then handed over the prioritized list to the female social organizer for onwards processing.

As one of the female social organizers commented that:

> The female in the village had lot of problems, but I told them to select only one of the many problems that is faced by the majority of the women of the village (Female Social Organizer Charsada).

Needs assessment was carried out by members of WCO and MCO as the men also knew the problems confronted by the local women. A staff member expressed that women members list the needs and select one schemes on priority basis. Another staff member held that:

> The needs are communicated by the WCO to female social organizer in form of resolution. The female SO, after examining its social feasibility, forwards the resolution to field engineers to check its technical feasibility. Then field engineer visits site/field and finally, the scheme goes for approval to regional and head offices respectively (Field Engineer Sawabi).

The people were requested to name and prioritize their important needs, through a multi-sectoral plan developed by NSRP staff. If meeting the needs is beyond NRSP resources, then as alternate, the NRSP staff informs them about other available options in which WCO is requested to identify needs.

As far as women participation in need assessment was concerned, it varied from district to district and was subject to the customs, traditions and normative order of the target community. The cultural condition was suitable for women participation in two districts namely Sawabi and Nowshehra, while in Charsada and Mardan women could not participate in needs identification.
The WCO manager informed that:

> We have worked out a democratic process to identify needs and normally, consent from two-third majority is required to decide a scheme. Shortage of clean drinking water was identified by WCO in meeting and subsequently, they proposed the scheme through a majority resolution. As a consequence, NRSP executed a hand pump scheme that was started, and carried out by WCO on their own with 20% contribution in cash (Manager WCO Mardan).

The members of WCO also involved members of male community organization (MCO) in needs identification in order to avoid duplication of physical infrastructure schemes. In addition, the women could not personally visit the NRSP office for fulfilling official formalities and documentation; therefore they discussed their proposed schemes with office bearers of MCO for necessary assistance.

Women's Participation in Planning

Planning is an important step in development process. In NRSP interventions, planning in women organizations is carried out by the WCO members themselves while the role of staff is just to guide them in the whole process. As part of the Village Development Plan, the NRSP staff asked the local women about their needs.
A staff member of NRSP stated in this connection:

> The women plan schemes according to their own distinctive priorities and needs (Female Social Organizer Mardan).

Contrary to the above statement, an office bearer of the WCO stated that due to male dominancy and other cultural barriers, women could not participate directly in planning process; rather the members of male community organization helped the WCO in identification of place for the physical infrastructure scheme.
A manager of WCO mentioned that:

> At the time of forming a committee, a member of MCO was included who undertook all the activities that the WCO members couldn't perform due to social restrictions. He helped engineers to locate the site for hand pump scheme (Member WCO Nowshehra).

Conversely, a president of one WCO personally facilitated the engineers in selection of the site for physical infrastructure scheme. The president informed that:

> I helped the engineers and the social organizers in choosing the location for watercourses scheme (President WCO, Sawabi)

Women's Participation in Implementation

Implementation of the physical infrastructure scheme is an important step in the project cycle but the women of the target area implemented the schemes with the help of office bearers of the MCO or the male members of their families. The WCO nominated two of the office bearers from the MCO for audit and works committees while the engineers also paid visits to the schemes for checking the quantity and quality of the material used.

A staff member explained that:

> The WCO implemented the scheme on their own; but for on the site supervision, the members of MCO were asked to supervise the scheme as the cultural conditions did not allow women to go outside for regularly overseeing the progress (Female Social Organizer Mardan).

Regarding the role of women in the development of local area, a staff member mentioned that:

> As a dire need of the people in the mohallah, the WCO launched a hand pump scheme. The MCO president helped WCO in material purchase, implementation and supervision of the scheme (Senior Social Organizer Mardan).

Regarding implementation of the scheme, an office bearer of WCO held that:

> The WCO executed the scheme with help from MCO members. Committees were formed to operate and maintain the scheme, and also help the staff to implement and monitor the current schemes (Member, WCO Mardan).

Interestingly, one WCO president executed her entire scheme herself. She explained that:

> I carried out two schemes myself. I bought material, executed and monitored water supply and watercourses schemes in the village. Nevertheless, the MCO members also helped me to get material from the local market (Manager WCO Sawabi).

Women's Participation in Monitoring and Evaluation

Women community organization nominated two members of MCO for monitoring the ongoing developmental activity as women could not perform this task. Then members of MCO purchased construction material and supervised the scheme for ensuring quality and quantity.

President of WCO held in this regard:

> Since we could not supervise the current schemes by our own, we picked out two MCO members to overlook the complete progress of the scheme (President, WCO Nowshehra).

Although the women community organization members carried out monitoring through MCO on regular basis, but evaluation was carried out by the staff members of monitoring and evaluation department as well as the donors. In addition, NRSP also kept three percent of the CO share for ensuring timely maintenance and then released it if maintenance was not required.

Conclusions

The study on the basis of findings concludes that NRSP is a government sponsored participatory development NGO, working mainly for provision of services to the people at the grassroots level. NRSP mobilizes the target beneficiaries including women for meaningful participation in the project cycle, but there are some socio-cultural constraints which do not allow women to take part in the project cycle. Those factors are patriarchal structure, male dominated society, traditional leaders, political interference, misinterpretation of religion, religious extremism and Purdah (veil). In addition, donor's pressure compelled the NRSP staff to achieve the targets in specific time at the cost of participatory development strategy. Besides that the local political leaders used these WCOs for getting schemes from NRSP merely for strengthening their hold in the area.

In such a situation it is difficult for NRSP staff to give enough time for mobilization of women of the target communities for taking part in developmental interventions. Such factors contributed towards the failure of participatory development strategy in NRSP interventions in the target area and the developmental activities remained unsustainable.

Recommendations

The study recommends that as participation is indigenous in nature, therefore people should be encouraged and meaningfully involved at all the stages of the project cycle. While launching any intervention in the target area the NRSP management at the field offices should take all the stakeholders onboard including elected members of local bodies' so that they may cooperate with the NRSP staff at the time of implementation of schemes.

In addition, NRSP should adopt a process oriented approach instead of target based/oriented approach. In this way, NRSP staff will be able to meaningfully involve women in the project cycle. Furthermore, NRSP staff should give sufficient time to the

social mobilization and social organization process so that the women organization can get mature for achieving sustained results.

Before launching a developmental intervention, NRSP should organize a broad-based community meeting at the village level and brief all the beneficiaries about the aim and objectives of the project to be launched.

The study also recommends that NRSP staff should train the women community organizations in office management, record keeping, maintaining cash book and operating of machines like computers etc so that they can run their organization in the best way. In addition NRSP management should also arrange exposure and excursion visits for the members of WCOs so that can learn new ideas for initiating new projects in their localities.

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