

The role of social Mobilization in women empowerment in rural areas: Evidence from Balochistan, Pakistan

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Abstract

This research paper is based on the qualitative findings of the longitudinal study titled, “Participatory Action Research on Dynamics of Household Poverty and Inclusive Development in Balochistan with a Focus on Women’s Empowerment”. The study was conducted under the European Union-funded BRACE Programme. Based on the qualitative results of the longitudinal study, this research tries to gauge the role of social mobilizations impart women empowerment in rural areas. Evidently social mobilisation can contribute positively to empowering women in exercising their rights at individual, household, and community levels in rural Pakistan. However, it’s a long term process. Social mobilisation instils empowerment through social interactions among womenfolk while raising their awareness about various socio-economic facets. It gives women understanding about new perspective on their lives at the household and the community levels. However, in this regard engaging the support of men is essential. When men become allies in this process, they understand and support gender equality and see empowerment of women as societal benefit.

Key words: Social mobilization, women, empowerment, rural areas

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Introduction

Social mobilisation has been seen as a primary step for community development which allows for collective thinking and planning for the betterment of all those involved (UN-HABITAT, 2007). It becomes a platform where communities make informed decisions for sustainable results (UN-HABITAT, 2007). Social mobilisation is also described as a self-help group and as a means for empowering the underprivileged population to demand and access basic facilities like health, education, livelihood and credit (Kakati, 2013). Social mobilisation has been employed to influence a large number of individuals to participate in activities and alter behaviours which directly concern them at individual and collective levels, and contribute towards a change in behavior (Rogers, Goldstein and Fox, 2018). Motivational force of social mobilisation benefits and encourages members of the community to become part of collective efforts, especially in the form of social networks (Rogers, Goldstein and Fox, 2018). It has been used as tool for changing behaviors and practices in several fields and sectors, including education, health, economic empowerment, rights, etc. In Pakistan, Rural Support Programmes Network's approach to social mobilisation revolves around the three-tier support. It is aimed at enabling rural poor to form and own organizations at the community level in order to realize their potential. The three-tier approach consists of Community Organizations (COs), Village Development Organizations (VDOs), and Local Support Organizations (LSOs). COs effectively contribute to long-term stability and functionality of VDOs and LSOs. This approach is directly connected with gender empowerment, focusing on women's inclusion and involvement in decision making about their lives. Importantly the focus is not only providing women forum for inclusion, but also to encourage them to take on the leadership role, which is guaranteed through gender-equitable clauses of VDOs and LSOs charters. Additionally women in leadership roles ensure development activities remain gender sensitive (Azizi & Khan, 2009).

Lisa Veneklasen and Valerie Miller see power in the public, private, and intimate realms. Empowerment of women is the realisation of their political, social, and economic rights in an enabling environment which encourages them to contribute to national progress (Chandio and Ali, 2021). Sen sees empowerment as "an expansion in an individual's agency that is, expansion in one's ability to act and bring about change (Sen, 1999) However, women empowerment is hampered in a patriarchal social setup, marked by feudal culture, religious misinterpretation and dogmatism, illiteracy, poverty, and lack of economic freedom (Chandio and Ali, 2021).

For Save the Children, empowerment is when people can “make choices and take actions on their own behalf with self-confidence, from a position of economic, political and social strength”(Children, 1998). Sarah Hlupekile Longwe, a gender expert in Zambia, sees women empowerment in five stages of welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control. In this framework, at the welfare stage women’s and men’s material needs, such as food and health care are met. In the next step, women gain access to resources such as land, labor, credit, training, public services, legal rights on an equal basis with men. At the conscientization stage, women and men participate equally in decision-making in all programs and policies. The achievement of these four stages lead to control when men and women have equal control over production and the distribution of benefits(Longwe, 2009).

Pakistan’s constitution grants equal rights to women and men, with Article 25 declaring all citizens equal before law with no discrimination on the basis of sex, and allows the state to make special provisions for the protection of women and children.

However, the Gender Gap Index 2021 paints a bleak picture of gender inequality in Pakistan. In terms of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, the country ranks 152, 144, 153, and 98 on the index respectively. On the Women Economic and Social Empowerment (WESE) Index, women are not anywhere near in achieving economic or social empowerment across the four provinces of Pakistan. Furthermore, on the WESE scale of 0 to 1 (which includes four dimensions and seven indicators of labour force participation, education, health, and awareness) Punjab rests at 0.5 level, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 0.35, Sindh at 0.3 and Balochistan is at 0.21 being the lowest among all the provinces (Zaidi et al., 2018). On the other, women in Pakistan are an active but unrecognized part of the economy. In rural Pakistan, women’s unpaid work has been estimated at PKR 683 billion or 2.6% of GDP (Zaidi et al., 2018).

Though a wide range of cultural, individual, and household elements have been identified as barriers to changing gender relations in rural Pakistan, there has been growing realisation that without investing into women, economic growth and poverty reduction would remain restricted(Ahmad, Hameed, Khan & Rafi, 2017). A major barrier is the patriarchal interpretation of the religion and the Quran, which clearly spells out women’s rights and economic welfare and ensures their obligatory share in the property.¹Improvement in the status of women in the

¹ Quran: 4:11, 4:12, 4:32

individual and collective spheres leads to better economic and social outcomes, encouraging them to earn income and contribute to household expenditure, devoting more resources to children's education and health, and having more say in decision making.²

Overall women in Balochistan face fundamental impediments in the form of “gendered divisions of space, labour, roles, and authority” in a tribal and ethnic social set up(Zia, 2018).³ Only 33.5% females in the province are literate, and 758 women out of 100,000 die during childbirth against the national average of 272.⁴ With tribal conventions not allowing property ownership for women, they have little or no say in decision-making in the public and private domains(Zia, 2018).

Over the last one decade there have been efforts to improve the gender imbalance. These include legislative and policy interventions –the Gender Policy Action Plan 2016-2019, the Domestic Violence Act 2014, the Anti-Harassment at Workplace 2016, the Provincial Commission on the Status of Women Act 2017, the People with Disability Act 2017, the Elderly People Act 2017, and the Child protection Act 2016.

The Balochistan government launched the Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Policy in October 2020 to “protect, advance and implement the constitutionally mandated principles and equal rights for women and girls of Balochistan through the provision of equitable and quality access to socio-economic services and opportunities, decision-making roles in public and private sectors including political representation and participation”. The main areas which the policy aim to improve are mainstreaming gender, gender-based governance, pro-women legislation, economic and political development, access to justice, bridging gender gap, and saving women from effects of climate change and humanitarian emergencies(Balochistan, 2020).

Study objective

- The objective of the study was to gather and present evidence about the role of social mobilisation in imparting women empowerment in accordance with various indices of empowerment (power to, power over, power with in and power to), as defined in VeneKlassen and Miller's framework. The framework analyses women empowerment in the context of power within, power to, power with, power over, environmental/political as well as legal dimensions of empowerment. Power within is empowerment at the personal level in

² Ibid

³ Dawn. 13 June 2021. Women in Balochistan. [available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1629102>]

terms of self-esteem, self-confidence, articulateness and personal autonomy. In the next step, the “*power to*” takes the form of increase in knowledge, access to information, and income. After self-sufficiency at the personal level, “*power with*” takes women outside home where they become part of social capital, participate in community groups, and their initiatives. After completing the first three stages, the “*power over*” is the critical stage where women exercise their political and leadership roles in the context of their rights within and outside family. Once the understanding about their rights and their potential within and outside household is developed, women are ready access legal services, challenge stereotypes, advocate change for other women, and increase their political influence.

- The study also aimed at analyzing the interplay between the social mobilisation-based empowerment acquisition and manifestation by the womenfolk at individual, household, and community levels.

Significance of the study:

This paper assesses the role of social mobilisation interventions to bring about a change in empowerment dynamics of women in a challenging social, cultural, and economic environment for women in Balochistan. Most importantly, the research sees women empowerment from the lens of the men and gives the construct of women’s empowerment from the perspective of men in the realms of society, culture and religion. This study would contribute to long term efforts needed to foster a positive change in attitudes and behaviours of women and men to make them productive members of the society at individual, household, and community levels.

Data and Methodological Framework

Study area

Spread over 347,190 sq. km, Balochistan is Pakistan’s largest but least populated province. Though the province makes up more than 43% of the country’s total area, its population is 12.34 million (male 52.52%: female 47.47%), according to the 2017 census. Balochistan is one of the least developed amongst the four provinces. The rural population is 72.4% while 27.6% lives in urban areas. Despite being the least populated province, Balochistan has the second highest rate of multidimensional poverty. This study assess the role of social mobilization in women empowerment in three districts of Balochistan – Khuzdar, Loralai and Kech. For the longitudinal study, the locations were identified through purposive sampling. Since various regions of

Balochistan significantly differ in terms of ecology, culture and ethnicity, the sample was selected from three zones of the province, i.e. north, east and south. These zones are pertinent in terms of their characteristics related to ecology, environment, ethnicity and culture.

Methodology and Sampling

This study covers the first and second waves of a longitudinal study carried out using the Participatory Action Research (PRA) for the EU-funded Balochistan Rural Development & Community Empowerment (BRACE) Programme.

Sampling Universe and Frame:

The programme is being implemented in the eight districts of Balochistan which significantly differ in terms of ecology, culture and ethnicity. However, for the longitudinal study, three districts were selected through purposive sampling. A three-step selection procedure was adopted using a systematic and rationalized approach.

First, the programme districts were divided into the following three zones:

- (i) **North**
(Killa Abdullah, Pishin, Zhob & Loralai);
- (ii) **East**
(JhalMagsi, &Khuzdar); and
- South**

Then in the second step, the three districts i.e., Loralai, Khuzdar and Kech were purposively selected from each zone. In the third step, in each district, 02 UCs were randomly selected where programme interventions were being carried out. Similarly, two villages from each UC were further randomly selected from a list of programme villages. Thus, a total of four villages were selected from each district and a total of 12 villages were covered for data collection.

Sample Size:

Though the qualitative sample sizes strictly follow the homogeneity principals where normally large sample size often not required, however, contrarily the qualitative sample must also be large enough to obtain enough data to adequately describe the research objectives as well as reasonable drawing of inference and generalization at a large level.

The research data gathered through a sample of 218 Life History Interviews (LHIS) of men, 218 LHIs of women, 24 FGDs (12 with women and 12 with men), 12 PRAs and three consultative meetings with the representatives of government departments has been used to present the study findings.

Data Collation and Analysis:

The information collected was passed through the following steps for drawing results.

- *Transcription to text:* Qualitative information was recorded in a local language which was first translated into English and then turned into transcripts keeping in view the study questions and objectives. This translation and transcription process was closely monitored by the qualitative researcher and the team leader, who ensured that the real meaning of questions was clearly and correctly conveyed in the translated scripts. The objective was to verify that the translation properly captured the respondents' views.
- *Themes creation:* Qualitative transcribed text and data was then divided into themes and sub-themes as per the study objectives.
- *Categorization of Data:* The themes and sub-themes were further categorized/classified/ranked/clustered as per the study objective.

The categorized/classified/ranked/clustered statements were broken down into conceptual components and mapped against the indicators of empowerment to make sense of information around the referred indicators. The analysis used inductive and deductive reasoning techniques to draw findings. Moreover, relationships and causal links were also established between categories to obtain results. Since, the qualitative data analysis is definitely a cognitive process of research, the researchers gave a devoted maximum time to reflect upon the information collected and analyze and re-analyze it until they reached to a theoretical explanation against a particular research question, issue or a problem statement.

Findings

BRACE programme aims to empower citizens and communities. It provides means to enable women and communities to implement community-led socio-economic development interventions. It also seeks to influence public policy through active engagement with local authorities for quality, inclusive, and equitable service delivery; and civic-oversight. One of the

programme's goal is to reduce gender inequalities, therefore, women empowerment as a cross cutting theme in every aspect of the programme.

Women are part of every intervention of BRACE programme such as sessions on rights, community linkages, adult literacy and numeracy skills, income generating grants, vocational trainings, community investment fund and livestock rearing.

In order to appreciate the role of social mobilisation in women empowerment, it is critical to understand the profile of female respondents in the three districts. After the first wave, a vast majority of respondents of LHIs, FDGs, and consultative meetings described the role of women within household as submissive. Illiteracy was pointed out as the main barrier. Dominance of patriarchal roles and cultural norms contributed to women's submissive role in and outside the household and in the community. Women had little or no say in the decision making in the household and in the community.

The realization of power within in a patriarchal society is feeble among women. This is mainly because of unfavourable socio-cultural norms which limit women's role at the household and societal levels (Alizai, Dostain&Shaikh, 2020). Men's limited perception of women as a second fiddle also contributes to restricting them from exercising their rights at the individual, household, and community levels. It is evident from existing research literature that without significantly altering men's perception regarding status and role of women in the household and in the community, the task of achieving gender equality would continue to face challenges and hurdles (Ruxton & Oxfam, 2004).

Social mobilization has made a difference in terms of women seeing themselves in roles and positions within and beyond household. This difference is more pronounced in Khuzdar and Kech than in Loralai. The awareness about their rights, ability to contribute to income generation and savings, participating in social group activities, capacity development amongst women to read, write, and calculate gives women a new perspective on life. Awareness about rights and issues has been considered as the first step to plan and make an effort for change (Karin, Yuliya&, Konstantyn, 2017). This journey of awareness starts at the individual level through social mobilisation led awareness sessions and other activities. However at the individual level for women, lack of education is a major barrier in accessing rights as a citizen.

Importantly social mobilisation provided women with space and forum to get together and talk about themselves, their roles in the household and in the community, and how can they

contribute to individual and community development. Here we try to see the social mobilisation's effects on women's lives in the context of the Veneklassen and Miller framework.

Power Within

In terms of power within, women in Loralai over the two waves present a weak outlook. They seem to have little sense of their importance in the household as they generally have little say in the decision making. At the same time, it is clear that understanding of men regarding women's role in the household is strictly patriarchal. Illiteracy has been considered as the main trigger for low personal autonomy in the district. Out of 570 public schools in rural areas of Loralai, only 145 are for girls. Overall the female literacy rate for 15 years and above is 12% and for 10 years and above population 15%. On the other hand, in these two categories, male's literacy rate is 55% and 57% respectively.

In Kech and Khuzdar, however, the situation is relatively better. Within the household the role profile of females is much better. With greater mobility, women have a say in matters like education of children, daily expenses, health issues, taking care of livestock, etc.

According to the life histories and FGDs, women and men in the two districts attribute increased awareness to the female's role in the household to social mobilisation. This was also backed by BRSP and NRSP inputs such as the income generating grants, livestock and awareness about women rights.

Social mobilisation imparts an understanding among women about their individual role in the form of better self-esteem, as per findings of the study. This initial understanding leads to the next stages of empowerment such as enhancing their overall individual capacity based on the knowledge acquired through access to information.

Power To

This further leads women to a new sense of *power to*, where they start to see themselves as decision makers or start contributing to the process of decision making in the household and/or in community, as evident from LHIs and FGDs. In this regard, women in Khuzdar and Kech were clearer about this stage than their counterparts in Loralai. Women in Loralai appear to be lacking in developing individual capacity and accessing knowledge and information. This is mainly due to extremely limited mobility. In the two waves, there is almost no shift in the *power to* context in the district.

In Kech and Khuzdar, there has been a positive change in this regard. Women reported increased participation in discussion around household income and expenditures. Men seem to be receptive to the change of consulting women in matters they thought were solely their domain. In the two districts, women also narrated how their embroidery skills helped contribute to family's income. They attributed this change to social mobilisation sessions by BRSP and NRSP. The sessions introduced them to the importance of their say in the household matters, their rights, especially to health and education, the importance of having national identity card and mostly importantly their right to voting.

They registered improvement in their individual capacities, in their access to information and especially their contribution to household's income and savings.

With loan for work from BRSP, Razia in Kech was able to open a shop in a girls' school in her village. The income from the shop enabled her to contribute to family's expenses. But most importantly she gained confidence in herself and noticed a positive change in her husband's attitude towards her.

From the LHIs and FGDs, it is evident the realisation about their enhanced role as an active member of the household and the community goes hand in hand with income generating initiatives. Women with increased say in household matters regarding income and expenditure used their embroidery and needle work skills to produce traditional Balochi clothes to be sold in the open market. This realisation of their income generation capability hinges on the awareness and recognition of their role. Women maintained that social mobilisation campaign helped improve their participation in household income and expenditure decisions. A research in India asserts that enhanced understanding of role of women in wheat-based agricultural systems assisted women to have more say in decision making (Farnworth et al., 2021). However, illiteracy and lack of mobility severely limit women's role and make them socially excluded. This has been witnessed quite vividly in Loralai.

Power with

The first two stages of empowerment – power within and power to – prepared women for the life outside home. Social mobilisations activities, backed by BRACE interventions such as IGCs, TVETS, and CIFs, created opportunities for women to form associations in the form of COs and VOs.

Kech and Khuzdar witnessed a progressive upward movement in women's participation in social group forums. This helped to improve their mobility as they started collecting inputs for livestock, agriculture products as well as sewing and embroidery from market. Additionally, the social association assisted them to develop trust at group level and find avenues of cooperation in terms of savings.

The progressive development in the two districts demonstrated social mobilisation leading to the formation of social capital. As the first two steps of empowerment at the individual level were lacking in Loralai, the critical step of forming social capital also remained weak in the district. The reaction to the interaction and mobilization interventions was found to be lukewarm.

In the two waves of the BRACE programme, social mobilisation has made a structural contribution to improving mobility of women, which in turn led them to becoming part of the skills development activities. Taking part in the skills development activities assisted women in not only learning a new skill but they also got an opportunity in the form of market access to employ that skill to contribute to the family's income. In Khuzdar and Kech, women took part in capacity building on livestock rearing, financial management, and embroidery. This can be considered as a first step in the structural transformation of the role of women in the household and in the community. This transformation is palpable in the developed and the developing countries (Dinkelman&Ngai, 2021).

Power over

However, the missing link in the women empowerment in the targeted areas is lack of political empowerment. The role of political participation is fundamental in addressing the discrimination against women in individual and social perspectives (Lead, 2017).

Overall there has been no change in the political participation of women over the two waves. This can be attributed to the patriarchal and feudal dominance of politics along with the absence of local government system in Balochistan.

However, social mobilization sessions helped to increase women's awareness about right to vote in Khuzdar and Kech. However, women in Loralai seem to be oblivious to the importance of their political participation.

Though women in Khuzdar and Kech realize their right to vote matters, the use of right to vote remains an issue. Majority of women maintain even if they know about the right to vote, they

cannot use this right based on their free will. Men seem to be sole arbiters about all political engagements.

Political empowerment is critical for transforming women's position at the societal level. At the turn of 21st century, Pakistan has witnessed significant measures to increase women's participation in political and electoral processes. These include reserving 33% seats for women in the local government and 17% in the provincial assemblies, National Assembly and the Senate. However, lack of women's political participation remains a concern both at the national and provincial levels. The number of registered female voters is still 11.81 million less than the male registered voters. However, the difference between male-female voters is 13.96% in Balochistan, which is higher than the national difference of 9.74%.

In none of the eight provincial assembly constituencies – four in Kech, three in Khuzdar and one in Loralai – have equal male and female voters. In Kech, Khuzdar and Loralai, there are 30073, 37053, and 16853 less women voters than male voters respectively (https://www.ecp.gov.pk/documents/er/ECP_PB_21122020.pdf). Further, during the 2018 general elections, in each of eight constituencies, less than half of the registered women voters used their right to vote.

On women rights, the pattern of improvement over the waves in Khuzdar and Kech with no shift in Loralai holds. Social mobilisation sessions enabled women in Khuzdar and Kech to get vital information regarding their rights to education and health, and the rights of their children. This awareness also helped them in improving their mobility with the intention of learning skills and employing them to make an earning and contribute to household's income.

Men's support

Another critical area of concern is lack of men's support for women empowerment in the selected villages. In this regard, there is improvement in Khuzdar and Kech but not in Loralai. In one of the FGDs in Loralai, women maintained that females working outside home with the purpose of livelihood casts "a bad shadow on the respect of a man".

Similarly, there has been no change in community leaders' attitude and beliefs in supporting women's access to courts Loralai and Kech. Less than one-third of women (31.06%) in Balochistan are part of the total labour force, which is ten years and above (GoP, 2019).

It is vitally important to highlight that two factors – respect for local context and support of men – are crucial to support social mobilisation regarding women's rights and empowerment, as per

the findings of research. In Khuzdar and Kech districts, there is a better understanding among men folk about the active role of women in the household and in the community. Generally, there is an acceptance among menfolk about the role of women in income generating activities in Kech and Khuzdar. The acceptance of menfolk is seen as a key enabler for women's empowerment in these districts along with social mobilisation.

Discussion

Evidently social mobilisation can contribute positively to empowering women in exercising their rights in rural Balochistan. Social mobilization regarding rights gives women the understanding and new perspective on their lives in the household and in the community. Mobilisation is a crucial contributing factor in raising women' awareness about their role inside and outside the household. This prepares them to take the first step in becoming part of the decisions and also making decisions about themselves about their households and most importantly about their children. Literacy can help boost the pace of this journey of personal realisation for the women. Once women realize that their role in the family and in the community goes beyond the kitchen, skills development helps them to broaden their horizon. They show keen interest and take initiative to learn skills to start a new journey both at the individual and collective levels.

The most important factor in the empowerment is the leadership role in the community. As women understand the utility of the social space for collective actions, they also take on the leadership roles.

However, with the support of men the process of women empowerment can become effective. As men hold position of power and influence, it is important to engage them as gatekeepers for efficient normative change, especially in the tribal and rural setup.⁵The first step is updating men's knowledge on the rights of women. It has been proved that transforming attitudes is a must for addressing the issue of discrimination and inequality, and critically challenging the perceptions regarding rigid gender roles. When men become allies, they understand and support gender equality and see empowerment of women as societal benefit.⁶

There is need for continuing the work of investing in women in order to help them become an individual who is an active part of the family and the community, and not an idle bystander. In this regard, focusing on behavioral change both in men and women is a must. Challenges to

⁵<https://womenforwomen.org.uk/sites/default/files/Files/WfWI%20MEP%20leave%20behind%20V4.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid

women empowerment vary from country to country and from community to community. The context of region, culture, tradition, and religion needs to be factored in for a long term but better change in the lives of women.⁷

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