Are NGOs Bridging the Gaps? Analyzing Opportunities for Gender and Political Empowerment in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract   *Gender and development approaches gained attention during the 1990s; since then government and nongovernmental organizations have adopted these approaches for gender and political empowerment in Pakistan. This paper analyzes the contribution of NGOs towards gender and political empowerment in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This study explored how NGO interventions created opportunities for gender and political empowerment. This study presents an analysis of NGO policies and practices for gender and political empowerment in the research area. Qualitative research methods including semi-structured interviews and participant observations were used to conduct this study. The study revealed that NGOs created spaces for political awareness and participation of men and women community members, councilors and policymakers. This study argues that NGO interventions can create opportunities and effectively contribute to gender and political empowerment goals if contextually planned and implemented in the research area.*

Key Words
Gender, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, NGO Approaches, Opportunities, Peshawar, Political Empowerment.

Introduction

As a result of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), third world countries developed policies and civil society organizations designed strategies and methodologies for gender mainstreaming in public spheres like employment and politics (Moser, 2005). After signing the Convention on the elimination of Discrimination against Women like many other developing countries, the Government of Pakistan promulgated various policies and implemented various programs for gender and political empowerment with the collaboration of international development agencies and NGOs (Weiss, 2007).

Generally in Pakistan, NGOs have contributed to policymaking related to women empowerment and raised awareness on their social, economic and political rights (Siddiqui, 2012). There is also a strong critic of NGOs practices as these organizations do not relate socially and economically to the poor and marginalized community women (Awan & Zammurad, 2012). Many studies have been conducted on the status of women in politics and challenges towards women political empowerment in KP (Ahmad & Anwar, 2017; Nasreen, Sanauddin & Gul, 2016; Naz, Daraz, Hussain, Mughal & Alam, 2012) but there is still dearth of research on NGO roles and contribution towards gender and political empowerment particularly in KP.

It is paramount to analyze the role of NGOs in strengthening opportunities for gender and political empowerment in KP. This paper analyzes opportunities created by NGOs through gender and political empowerment projects. Furthermore, this paper presents a critical analysis of the policies and practices of selected organizations. This study poses the following research questions i.e. how NGOs create opportunities for gender and political empowerment, and why NGO interventions cannot achieve required gender and development goals.

Theoretical Framework

CSOs come to stand for marginalized people (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005) and bring opportunities through making and increasing invited spaces (Cornwall, 2002). UN (2018) mentions that CSOs include NGOs. Women and the marginalized can gain political skills and political space through invited and claimed spaces created by NGOs (Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2004). Invited spaces are generated by various authorities like Government, CSOs or NGOs where the marginalized are invited to participate (Gaventa, 2006). Created spaces are claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders (ibid.) for example self-help groups (Mathur & Agarwal, 2017).

Empowerment flows through participation, capacity building or institutional development (Rowlands, 1998). Following Rowland's (1997) approach NGOs can enhance women's empowerment by inducing invited and claimed spaces for women's individual consciousness (power within), through collective action (power with) that can organize and exert power to challenge gender hierarchies and improve women's control over (power over) their lives. CSOs can induce participation through invited and claimed spaces (Gaventa, 2006) which Agarwal (2001) explains as nominal, passive, consultative, activity-specific, active and interactive participation.

However, NGO projects and interventions bring opportunities for marginalized ones but often underestimate gender complexities and oscillate between Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) approaches (March et. al, 2005). The literature suggests that NGOs fail to achieve desired gender and development goals. There are multiple reasons including inadequate conceptual understanding of gender and social relations which define access and control towards resources within the community (Nyborg, 2002; Khalid 2015), gender blind approaches, which may reinforce closed spaces i.e. local patriarchal and elite control (Momsen, 2010; Gaventa, 2006) which leave the least powerful without voice (Cornwall & Brock, 2005), and upward accountability i.e. project interventions are implemented according to donor requirements (Wallace, Bornstein & Chapman, 2007). In order to achieve desired results, March et. al (2005) suggest that a wise selection of mixed and matched gender and development approaches is required during planning and implementation of projects and interventions. In addition, communities must be identified as citizens rather than beneficiaries (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted in Peshawar as it is the capital of KP and center of operation of all NGO's working in KP. To analyze NGO approaches for gender and political empowerment three organizations were purposefully selected on the criteria that these organizations are running projects on gender and political empowerment specifically in Peshawar and other districts of KP from last three years.

Methods

Keeping in view gendered nature of the research we used snowball sampling to select men and women respondents from beneficiary communities. To keep research non-partisan we used purposeful sampling technique to select men and women political representatives i.e. MPA's, councilors, staff/officials from NGOs. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The purpose of using participant observations was to ensure holistic information so that no possible gap is left in obtaining valid results. To critically observe project benefits for gender and political empowerment, participant observation was used in three field meetings of NGO workers with community men and women. Keeping in view the gendered nature of this research and the resistant society, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to get a deeper insight into the issue. In total **83** interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Among these 83 respondents, 6 (3 men and 3 women) were MPAs, 28 councilors (14 men and 14 women), 40 community members (5 men and 5 women from each locality) and 9 NGO workers (3 project heads and 6 social mobilizers).

Results

NGOs raised political literacy and awareness among men and women community members, councilors and policymakers through social mobilization sessions and training. Data shows that NGOs not only raised political literacy but also increased participation of women community members, councilors and policymakers through participatory practices e.g. through the formation of women committees, self-help committees, mixed committees and women's parliamentary caucus. See details in Table 1 (Appendix 1)

Although NGOs created opportunities for men and women community members, councilors and policymakers, these opportunities contributed minimally to the substantive participation of community women in political

activities. Due to the split between policies and practices, NGOs could not achieve the desired gender and political empowerment goals in some beneficiary communities. See details in Table 2 (Appendix 2)

Discussions

Community Awareness

"I have attended almost three trainings and now I am quite aware of the local government system and about the responsibilities of a local councilor and politicians. At least now I know who is responsible for what? Now I know where to complain about which issue?"

The above quoted response from an illiterate male respondent illustrates that projects brought opportunities through social mobilization and awareness-raising sessions which Cornwall (2002) and Gaventa (2006) call 'invited spaces' for traditionally marginalized actors. NGOs created a new form of consultation and induced confidence among community women to get their political rights i.e. 'sense of power with and power over' as explained by Rowlands (1997). For example, a majority of community women reported that interactions with local lady councilors during training benefited them in multiple ways e.g. many women received a sewing machine and jahez package from the allotted fund of Tehsil council for community women. By mediating these democratic spaces i.e. women community acquaintances with local lady councilors NGOs gained trust among community women to further implement project activities. Due to trust in these projects community women developed a 'sense of power to and power over' and many women beneficiaries voted in local elections after attending training.

Spaces for Participation

One of the female SMs sharing a success story from her field area said that:

"When I went to my field area, one of the community men told me about a lady lawyer. She was running a self-help group which was formed by another NGO two years ago. I informed her about the project activities. The good thing about this committee was that it included women from various socio-economic backgrounds. I delivered a session and asked the women members to come for training. Almost all women participated in the next training. Contrary to my expectations when I went to the field for post-training evaluation, I found that most of the women voted in local elections and one of them was elected as lady councilor. Later I reported success story of this lady councilor."

The above response is an example of how collective action or cooperation between individuals and organizations occurs through the establishment of relationships. Self-help women groups had already established relationships and partnerships in their respective areas. Self-help women committees had gained a reputation and space in the community. Thus relationships were generated through the formal mechanisms of coordination and through the informal relationships of social capital and social relations i.e. self-help women committees. Democratic spaces mediated by NGO have helped these women's groups to negotiate collectively with different societal institutions (power with) and fulfill strategic gender needs through awareness (power within).

NGOs registered computerized national identity cards in various areas for women through the National Database and Registration Authority and Election commission of Pakistan. To register NIC's NGO field workers conducted social mobilization sessions with political workers i.e. local councilors. Local councilors motivated community men and women to register their CNIC at their doorstep. NADRA provided Mobile Registration Vans for the door to door registration to these NGO workers. In various areas, many community men and women registered their CNICs through these MRVs. NGOs invited spaces through coordination and partnership with government organizations and councilors. These invited spaces induced activity-specific participation for women like women registered their CNICs at their doorstep. Similarly, with the collaboration of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women and Local government Department, NGOs conducted training for men and women councilors and politicians. Most of the women councilors started attending council meetings after attending training. A lady counselor narrated that:

"After I was elected as lady councilor, a female NGO worker came to meet me. She asked me about local governance issues, I was totally blind. She invited me to attend training. I attended training and I got aware of the local government system, my roles and responsibilities. Now I confidently give suggestions in council meetings"

The above mentioned response relates Agarwal's (2001) approach to participation with Rowland's (1997) approach to empowerment i.e. active and activity-specific participation of the lady councilor led to power i.e. she gained knowledge about her political authority and rights which further led to her interactive participation in the council meetings and developed a sense of power over within her.

Opportunities for Policy Makers

Gender equality in political participation and women role as decision-makers has always been supported by a number of civil society organizations in Pakistan (NCSW, 2010). NGOs have strengthened women decision making power through women parliamentary caucus, international training, public talks, participation in parliamentary committees.

NGOs have provided women politicians with 'invited spaces' through the establishment of WPC. WPC as invited space for women MPAs induced active and activity-specific participation; for example, women politicians formulated pro-women bills as part of WPC. Due to invited spaces, like WPC women politicians have claimed political empowerment. Women politicians have developed a sense of power by being affiliated with WPC. Women politicians have also exhibited a sense of 'power within' and 'power to' by presenting pro-women bills in assembly.

The majority of women politicians exhibited a confidence i.e. power within to participate in budget sessions after training. One of the women politicians shared her experience on study tours quoted that:

"We (women politicians) got a chance to interact with British and Swiss parliamentarians and it was a great learning experience. During these interactions, I got to know that there should be a gender audit of the annual budget. Gender audit of the budget will direct funds towards 50% of our population i.e. women. Soon we will raise voice for gender audit of the budget and gender-sensitive budgeting"

Although women politicians didn't define gender explicitly but inherently in their responses gender meant women. Not only women but men politicians could not clearly define the term gender. Most of the men politicians reported that training and sessions by local and international NGOs raised awareness on several governance issues and public policy. On the contrary to women politicians, men politicians were concerned about policymaking and legislation for development issues and strengthening institutions. Men politicians who attended gender training and sessions were just focusing on the quotas for women in politics and jobs. For men politicians reserving seats for women was enough for women political empowerment. While explaining the impacts of NGO interventions on gender and political empowerment, a male MPA quoted that:

"Due to efforts of these NGOs women have reserved seats in jobs and politics. What else they want"

NGO interventions raised awareness among women politicians, invited and created spaces for gender and political empowerment like men and women gained knowledge on policymaking and budgeting. Women policymakers claimed substantive political participation and empowerment by formulating pro-women bills and presenting these bills to the decision-making table through WPC. NGO interventions provided a limited scope for women policymakers where they could only work on women issues like WPC. Similarly, men policymakers interpreted the participation and empowerment of women policymakers as 'reserve seats' which again reinforced the limited scope of work for women politicians.

Policies Vs Practices

Data from interviews, policy and project documents showed that all the selected NGOs were following gender-inclusive strategies during project interventions and implementation. According to a Project Manager:

"This project aims to aware men and women on their political rights and to train them on taking an active part in decision-making processes, for this purpose committee of both men and women are formed within community. Committees are trained by our project staff on gender and women empowerment and these committees further aware and train community in their respective areas. Government and local political representatives are part of these committees. Female councilors are also part of these committees. These committees resolve local issues with the help of local political representatives and community"

The above mentioned response from project manager shows that in policy NGOs were following a bottom-up approach i.e. women and men committees were formed. Project activities provided an opportunity for interactive and active participation for example; community men and women interacted with their local political representative to resolve issues within the community. The project empowered women through providing them claimed spaces i.e. constituting women committees and invited spaces i.e. by inviting men and women committee members on training.

All the NGOs claimed to have an explicit gender policy but men and women SMs were not aware of the gender policy of their organizations. It was revealed that men and women field workers, i.e. SMs, didn't have a clear understanding of the term "Gender". Social mobilizers related the term 'Gender' with gender equality. Male and female SMs defined 'gender' from a project perspective. It was revealed that SMs were performing their field activities with a view that women are deprived of their rights and should be provided status and opportunity equal to men. For example; a male social mobilizer said that:

"I don't know about gender policy of our organization but I had attended training on gender and what I understood about gender is that women should be given equal status to men."

Due to a lack of conceptual understanding on gender, in practice, most of NGOs were following a Women in Development strategy, welfare, and a top-down approach. This top-down approach created a dependency of women on men. In practice, the issues of equality and opportunity were not considered in any manner at all or women from the community were given only a nominal and passive representation. As a participant-observer researcher found that majority of the ratio of the area of meetings and activities of men versus women committees was 1:4 for example in the month of April if a men's committee had conducted 4 meetings a women's committee had conducted only 1 meeting. Women committees turned into proxy committees as female members were usually family members of men members in men committees and men members conducted a meeting on their behalf. While explaining the methodology for conducting sessions a female social mobilizer elucidated that:

"When we meet communities, my male coworker first conducts social mobilization sessions with men, aware them on the project and takes time for the next meeting. He requests men community members to arrange a few female members for the next meeting as it's a project requirement. Usually, two to three female appears in the next meeting often are family members of influential persons from the area. I aware them on the project and invite them on upcoming training and ask them if they can bring a few more women from the community"

The dependency of female SMs on male SMs shows that the role of female SMs was undermined by themselves and their male co-workers. Women community members were considered as subjects of development rather than actors in development. Data shows that in practice men and women SMs followed a gender-biased approach. Female and male SMs were seemingly not trained on gender-balanced approaches and gender policies of the organization which resulted in unfair 'participation' and 'empowerment' leaving the poor marginalized women deprived of project benefits.

Although social mobilization played a critical role in project implementation and interventions in the communities but in few areas social mobilization sessions were not properly conducted. In some beneficiary communities, SMs exaggerated project benefits rather than raising awareness and mobilizing the community to participate in decision-making processes. Furthermore, in most areas SMs could not properly raise awareness on gender and empowerment among community men and women. The majority of community men and women didn't have a clear understanding of gender and empowerment. Men and women considered 'Gender' synonymous to 'Women'. Community men and women assumed that gender means women and gender equality or gender mainstreaming means that women should be part of the project activities. One male respondent from the community said:

"Social mobilizers request us to call a few females from the community for committee membership as it is projected requirement"

Social mobilization sessions were not wisely conducted in many cases which reinforced gender hierarchies; for example, requesting men to select women for participation in project activities. Community men were communicated by SMs that women participation in project activities was just a project requirement, so they perceived women as project beneficiaries only rather than citizens. This shows SMs were more concerned about upward accountability where Cornwall and Brock (2005) points out that upward accountability may often leave the least powerful without voice or choice. In many cases, men took decisions on behalf of women too. The major reason revealed behind men taking control over decisions in committees by the community was an inappropriate methodology to form committees and women members were often relatives of men members in committees. While explaining the process of formation of the committee, a male member of the committee said that:

"Most of the women in the committee are either wives or sisters of men members. Their names are put on lists by men members just because of its project requirement, otherwise there is no need to give membership to women"

This data endorses the view that although NGO approaches contributed to gender and political empowerment in the research area, there was minuscule impact on women's substantive participation in political activities. The reason lies in gender blind methodology which reinforced gender hierarchies, local patriarchal and elite control. For example; as participant-observer in mix committee meetings we observed during meetings men discussed issues and women sat silently. When women wanted to answer our questions they were interrupted by men members. While a female committee member was replying to our question, a male member interrupted her and said:

"You are not aware of the issue, so you better keep quiet and let me explain the issue"

Conclusion

This study concludes that NGO interventions invited and created spaces for gender and political empowerment in the research area. Marginalized people like women claimed active and activity-specific participation through invited and created spaces. These spaces empowered women in political scenarios by developing 'power within' i.e. gaining knowledge of their political rights, 'power with' i.e. being affiliated with women committees, and 'power to' i.e. participating in political activities like voting and pro-women policy formulation. NGO interventions could not completely achieve the required gender and political empowerment goals in terms of developing 'power over' political resources within women. The reason NGO interventions were not completely effective was because in practice NGO approaches were inimical to women either as social mobilizer or as project beneficiaries. Furthermore, NGO interventions were conducted without conceptual understanding of gender which defines control over political resources. It is suggested here that NGO approaches should be designed and implemented considering men and women as an essential part of development rather than subjects of development to achieve broader gender and development goals.

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Table 1. NGO Interventions and Opportunities Created (Appendix 1)

NGO Interventions	Opportunities/Benefits		
	Community	**Councilors**	**Policymakers**
Mobilization and advocacy	Increased political literacy e.g. on local government system and responsibilities of local councilor	Increased awareness among women councilors on their role, local governance issues, concerned government departments and political systems	Increased awareness of roles and responsibilities of policymakers, increased awareness on policymaking
Training	Increased political literacy, Increased confidence among women to participate in political activities e.g. voting in local elections, acquaintances with local lady councilors	Increased political literacy, acquaintances with female members from constituency	Improved public speaking skills, Improved gender-sensitive planning and budgeting skills
Participatory Practices	Increased acquaintances with councilors, Increased participation in self-help groups within community and poverty reduction programs e.g. local lady councilors provided dowry and sewing machines through allocated council funds for women, Voter registration through NADRA, increased participation in local elections e.g. Voting	Proper utilization of funds allocated to councilors for women empowerment through an inclusive approach i.e. funds were utilized after interaction with community women according to their needs	Increased participation in formal political activities through women parliamentary caucus e.g. formulation and promulgation of pro-women legislation i.e. Dowry act, domestic violence bill

Table 2. Policies Vs Practices (Appendix 2)

Policies	Practices
Explicit clear understanding of gender	Gender understood as 'deprived women' by field workers
Gender inclusive project activities	Women and poor were excluded from project activities
Men and women SMs equally equipped and trained	Women SMs depend on men SMs to conduct field activities
Bottom-up participatory approach	Top-down women in development and welfare approach