

The Predicament of Empowerment: Women's Experience of Transformation in Pakistan

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Abstract

Women empowerment is perceived biggest policy challenge in Pakistan due to being a patriarchal society. Women are underpowered and usually hold a lower position in every sphere of society. Though the government had passed several policy papers for women empowerment, these remained confined to office shelves. This paper explores gender discrimination as one of the leading indicators that hinder women's development and promotes inequality exists in the family, at work, also in the political sphere, education, and health care. This paper has used a feminist framework to investigate how to reduce gender inequalities and provide equal opportunities for women and men. Finally, this paper concludes that feminist theory has identified the policy gaps in the distribution of power and raise awareness of power inequalities. This paper recommends concrete policy measures with implementations commitment that can only eliminate these barriers and promote gender equality towards empowering women in Pakistan.

Key Words:

Empowerment,
Development, Gender,
Inequality, Status of
Women, Violence,
Discrimination, Policy
Gaps

Introduction

The empowerment of women is one of the biggest problems in the society of Pakistan. Gender inequality is extensive and reflects the patriarchal nature of society which is dominated by men, mostly in Pakistan. Male dominance is in every field, from homes to communities. "Gender discrimination" is prevailing in terms of access to opportunities and resources, family, work, political sphere, education, and health care. The concept of women empowerment is based on the assumption of improvement of women's quality of life that can only be achieved by giving women the opportunities for exercising freedom of choice ([Zakar, Zakar & Kraemer, 2013](#)).

Women in Pakistan face diverse forms of inequality, discrimination, and violence in almost every sphere of their lives. Violence among girls and women is a severe problem ([Colucci & Hassan, 2014](#)). Women live in an atmosphere of fear, and their obedience is in exchange for the guarantee of their lives ([Babur, 2007](#)). Violence against women is often not conceived as a violation of human rights in Pakistan. People believe the violation is a regular aspect of their lives. Since 1970, women's rights movements began to emerge in Pakistan. While the government of Pakistan has formally established legal rights for women to a great extent, women do not claim their rights because they don't have an awareness of their basic rights ([Madhani, Karmaliani, Patel, Bann, McClure, Pasha, & Goldenberg, 2017](#)). Human Rights Commission Law in Pakistan states that 80% of young women are not aware of their fundamental legal rights, including those related to marriage and divorce ([Rehman, 2007](#)).

The woman carries out housework, takes care of the fields, animals, and the sale of agricultural products. Violence against women has a tangible impact in Pakistan because male prejudice is considered a violation of human rights. The violation is a normal aspect due to a weak criminal justice system and the absence of public pressure. Some are even afraid to promote them, and others believe in the stereotyped gender roles of their society even if these roles prevent them from realizing their rights. It will be leading to obstacles to spreading women's rights ([Critelli, 2010](#)).

Early marriages of the girls also lower down their status in society as they become dependent on their partners for income, education, and awareness. According to a report in Pakistan, 38% (nearly 10 million) of young women are wedded before they age 18 ([UNICEF, 2005](#)). A study showed that almost 15 to 71 women percent become the victim of violence during a lifetime ([Ali & Krantz, 2011](#))

Feminist Critiques: Theoretical Policy Perspectives

The literature on the empowerment of women exposes that idea of women empowerment has emerged more rapidly in the contemporary modern globalized world. The empowerment of women as part of theoretical approaches and policy initiatives seeks gender equality and development. Women empowerment has been

Perceived since the 1980s as a key concept for development issues. The notion was especially taken by activists from the South and made it flag bearers of their criticisms of Western feminism. Its popularity lies in the assumption that it will become a means of liberation and gender equality in society. The history of feminist movements rapidly evolved in the 19th century during the French revolution; the feminist movement mainly focused on equality. The central concern of feminism is the elimination of inequality between men and women. The main idea behind feminism is to provide equal opportunities and rights to women.

The basic notion behind feminism is to endeavor for obtaining equal status (Bock & James, 2005). The recent idea and the focus are that to recognize gender equality; societies must be re-designed for the protection of women's rights. However, the social, political, and economic structural developments are unfavourable for women. Numerous theories have been presented by feminists for recognizing these discriminations, and they have also promoted various ways of rectifying discrimination.

Feminist theory adopted the term empowerment and incorporated it into the issues of development and gender discourse. The concept of empowerment was adopted by feminism as a principle promoting the understanding of women as actors of change (Parpart, Rai, & Staudt, 2002). However, empowerment theory also draws on feminist theory. Feminist theory is premised, and its integral part is established from the feminist movement. The feminist movement has emerged from a vast range of ideologies, political and social movements, and for achieving political, personal, economic, social rights, and social equality must be based on irrespective of sex (Taylor, Whittier, Morris, & Mueller, 1992). This concept first appeared in the 1960s in connection with the black movement in the United States and has been widely used since then. From practice, it has been taken over by different right-based groups and conceptualized by many disciplines; for example, it has a link with social work, psychology, sociology, education, and development organizations. Globalization has accelerated global and local activities in the sense of "think globally," and act locally". The concept of empowerment includes both of these local and global dimensions as a part of sustainable development. The feminist concept, which was initially political activism, later found its way to be a discourse of development and gender equality.

In feminist studies, the notion of empowerment often occurs in the context of gender and development issues. This concept addresses feminization of poverty, the problems of globalization, and changing labor markets, at the same time raises the question of measuring real development results. In theory, this concept also touches on discussions about the universality of the concepts of democracy or economic justice. The term 'Radical' as contained in 'Radical Feminism' means 'complete knowledge,' i.e. 'going to the root' as opposed to extremist or dogmatic. This shows how gender-based differences in contemporary society structure whole life. They are united on the issue of their opposition to patriarchy's system of domination over women. Radical feminists say that due to patriarchy, women also accepted the reality of 'feminine qualities' (Sultana, 2010). It challenges the values of male culture and does not advocate that women follow men. On the contrary, it seeks to create new values based on the traditional culture of women.

A review of literature that is consistent with the women empowerment and gender inequality in Pakistan which is based on patriarchal nature, has significant themes of study for developing a framework for the investigation. In many developing countries, there are women degraded and distinguished through social practices and habits that are rooted in state policies, socio-cultural traditions, and economic systems. So, this study continues to address the gender concerns of disempowerment and also addresses the different forms of violence, inequalities, and gender discrimination in Pakistan. According to a study by Saigol, empowerment is a critical area but invisible because of silence and prejudices (Saigol, 2011). The literature points out that most of the studies are dealing with the issue of women's disempowerment; as Amjad Ali suggests that women empowerment is a debatable issue in Pakistan related to the person's fundamental rights and equality (Ali, 2017).

Abdul Razaque & Tayyaba Batool indicates that gender dynamics is known as a multifarious phenomenon in the society of Pakistan, such as social class, province/area, educational status, family status, and religious association. Pakistan is generally a dominant male society where several actors of hegemonic masculinities hinder women's rights (Zakar, Zakar & Kraemer, 2013). Pakistani Miyares (2013) describes that modern feminist and political theory is based on the ideas of liberalism and social democracy, where the theory focuses on the ideas of individualization. It is capable of self-actualization that is the key to liberalism is individuals associated with self-realization or choice and based on values of success, competitiveness, and personal improvement.

The literature also shows the idea of empowerment was adopted by feminism as a principle promoting the understanding of women as actors of change (Parpart et al., 2002). Planned developments in Pakistan have failed to address gender inequalities as a result of the gap between intention and policy implementation. Gender indicators show that gross gender inequalities in education, health, and also persist economic status. Increasing performance at the policy level could contribute to a more balanced gender position. The Pakistani government has taken many practical steps to reduce gender inequality. So, this study, while using a feminist theoretical framework and review of available literature, will recommend possible policy solutions on how to eliminate these barriers and how to promote gender equality towards empowering women in Pakistan.

Methods and Material

The study is based on a qualitative research method that primarily provides a preview of the historical perspective about the position of women in Pakistani society. In this segment, the historical and descriptive method is followed, and

Secondary data is used to support the research argument. The discourse analysis is channelized to evaluate the data for drawing analysis of the research.

Discussion

The essential feature of shaping the position of women in Pakistan is undoubtedly the practice of religion. In Islam status of women is clearly explained. Islam gives a very honorable status to all women, whether she is a mother, whether she is a sister as a wife, or as a daughter in all categories; women are very respectful. From different Ayat of Quran and hadith, we came to know that how much respect Islam has given to women. Before Islam, the case was different daughter was considered to be a shame, and they had been buried alive.

In Islam, women are noble production of society; they must be treated with love, care, and affection. In Islam, women are not considered useless things. Allah has created women, and Allah never created useless things. Some people denied the humanity of women, some people admired it, and some think that women are created only from men's pleasures and for the humble service of men. Women's job is to produce children and to keep happy men. But Islam has given an honorable place that is motherhood. Islam gives equal responsibilities both to men and women (Chaudhry, Nosheen, & Lodhi, 2012). Due to Islam, women's humanity and dignity are restored, and the conditions of women are improved (Mernissi, 1987). Men have some dominancy because men are the protectors of women. Man is not the only protector, but also he is to defend his women from bad conditions.

Major Causes of Women Inequality in Pakistan

Islam has given equal status to both sexes but has divided them in terms of their responsibilities. Most of the literature portrays the protection of women's rights as a challenge in Pakistan. Pakistan is a state where women are underprivileged of their basic rights in a male-dominated society which creates a sense of gender discrimination and inequality within the country (Akram, 2018). Pakistani society is governed by the norms of the patriarchal where males have a permanently dominant position over females. The multiple feminist moments lay emphasis and work throughout on the rights and proliferation of gender equality in society. Pakistani society, for a long period, has multiple old traditions and stereotypes practiced.

Women Action Forum (WAF) was formed in 1981 against gender stereotyping discrimination in Pakistan. Unfortunately, gender stereotyping discrimination in Pakistan formed many problems in carrying gender equality. Uneducated women are too dependent on their families, and the source of income has stayed in the hand of men. Illiterate women usually do not know their rights, and if they do, they do not have the means and resources to go to court. This low level of education prevents women from participating in the formal labor market. Because of a lack of education and skills, many women cannot find lucrative jobs. Most women in paid work have to settle for informal, poorly paid jobs. In the countryside, they mostly work as day laborers on farms. In the rural areas of Pakistan, men often make decisions in very discriminating ways for the women in their homes. The unequal treatment of women in Pakistan is also due to laws that have severely restricted women's rights over the years.

Policy Gaps and Gender-Based Violence

The 1973 constitution of Pakistan promoted fundamental rights, equal social status of women, and gender mainstreaming. Substantial gender inequality against women is a leading factor in hindering women's empowerment. Violence against girls and women is a severe problem in Pakistan (M. Tahir, 2017). In Pakistan, violence against women is an unusual behavior that has been made a "norm" in the feudal system of rural areas. Domestic violence in Pakistan is considered to be a private matter since it occurs in a family. It is assessed that more than 80% of Pakistani women have been the victim of psychological or physical domestic violence (Tahir, 2017).

For a more accurate understanding, it is necessary to explain the difference between violence and violence based on gender relationships. Violence is an act, which is carried out with the intent of physical harm to another person. Definition of violence based on gender was adopted in 1990 at the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development (APWLD) as follows: "Gender-based violence is any act involving the use of force or coercion to maintain or support hierarchy relations" (Hadi, 2017). Both non-governmental organizations and policymakers work together against Gender-based violence in Pakistan.

However, the key to success is the implementation of the policy to end violence against women in Pakistan. Policy implementation is not proper because almost all politicians or religious leaders, or feudalists value their tribal and religious norms to project narrow definitions of women's rights. It was found that, except in exceptional circumstances, cases of domestic violence were virtually never investigated or prosecuted. Even complaints concerning acts of domestic violence falling within the scope of criminal law, such as assault or attempted murder, are commonly ignored or downplayed by the police.

Annual Report 2008, published by the Human Rights Commission in Pakistan, estimates that 1019 women were killed out of "honor" in that year (Shahid, 2012). Another estimate suggests that since 2005, 10,000 lives have been lost annually in this context. In rural areas of Pakistan, dangerous societal norms and conservative practices are spreading, such as many women have been victims of rape or forced marriage, including honor killings, torturing, beating and acid-burning

are also quite common in rural areas ([Qaisrani, Liaquat, & Khokhar, 2016](#)). Unfortunately, the latest information has proved strong the relationship between the occurrence of various mental health symptoms, including suicide ideas and all forms of violence against Pakistani women.

Literacy Gap Among Genders in Pakistan

Women's entrance to higher education is considered to be a tool for their empowerment ([Rasul, 2014](#)). But women's literacy rate is less than men's in both rural and urban areas of Pakistan. In the rural areas of Pakistan, women have societal barriers, and they are highly restricted to get an education ([Moheyuddin, 2005a](#)). According to the Census Report of 1998, the literacy gap among genders is very high ([Memon, 2007](#)). 56.5% of males were literate; on the other hand, 32.6% of females were literate in urban areas of Pakistan. The literacy ratio based on gender is very much adverse in the rural areas where only 20.80% of females are literate ([Ambreen & Mohyuddin, 2012](#)). These are the reasons for the low literacy rate among women in Pakistan, such as 1) Women Poverty and Child Labour 2) Socio-Cultural Hurdles 3) Early Marriages 4) Lack of Resources 5) Schools in Remote Areas 6) Lack of Awareness for Girl-Child Education.

Female Child Labour

The lack of education, particularly in rural areas, is increasing child labour ([Haider & Qureshi, 2016](#)). According to UNICEF, 17.6% of Pakistani children work and support their families ([MacDonald, Wong, & Sheldon, 2015](#)). Girls work as household helpers, a common phenomenon in Pakistan (M. Ali, Shahab, Ushijima, & de Muynck, 2004). Often the absence of schools is a phenomenon in the countryside. In other cases, a school in the countryside exists, but only for boys. Poverty is also a major obstacle to the education of girls. This prevents girls from being educated. However, there is an unmistakable relationship between women's educational levels and their impact on children. This is their attitude caused by fear of losing power. Another reason for low literacy in rural areas is urban-based development in education.

Since the 1970s, the Pakistani government has been trying to apply several international agreements and conventions aimed at balancing gender relations in Pakistani society. The application of these agreements is primarily reflected in the creation of national equality programs, and in part, these agreements are also transferred to national equality programs legislation. Pakistan committed itself to this plan at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The plan includes the following areas for empowering women:

- Strengthen the rights of women;
- Eliminate poverty among women;
- Provide education and training for women;
- Resolve health issues women;
- Protection to women against violence;
- Strengthen the economy by women empowerment;
- Women role in the decision-making process;
- Institutional for women's empowerment;
- Role of women in media;
- Women and the environment;
- Strengthen the rights of girls.

Women's Employment Challenges

Women in Pakistan viewed severe gender-based discrimination relating to employment. According to many doctrinaires, female employment has positive effects on the country's economy and overall woman satisfaction. A study conducted by Asian Development Bank (2000) on Pakistani women has identified that "Pakistani women are surrounded in a web of subordination and dependency because of their low political, economic and social status in society. The mainstream of women suffers from all kinds of poverty. So that change women's position and societal views of their lowliness, structurally changed need to be brought about in the social and economic order that shape our social world". In Pakistan, most women participate in the informal sector, mainly in agriculture ([Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013](#)).

Very few women have their accounts or direct access to banks. The participation of women in the labor market in Pakistan is low, 21.8% (GOP, 2010). It is focused on the informal labor market where women have to face particular challenges in a relationship on social protection. Despite the great promise of demographic change and women's empowerment, there is still the onslaught of social marginalization, inequalities in access to public services, and socio-economic developments. However, the ratio of employment to a population for women (19.9%) is four times lower than for men (79.1%) and much lower than the ratio in South Asia as a whole (33.5%). Despite a significant increase in job opportunities, gender equality in access to the labor market has not yet been achieved in Pakistan. Women in Pakistan face severe discrimination in employment.

Currently, the Government of Pakistan is establishing significant policy efforts to empower women in the whole country, especially in rural areas, by providing them with sufficient education and confirming their participation in national and provincial assemblies. Likewise, the country needs massive investment during the process of rural development. Long-

term policy planning is required to achieve lasting change, especially in strengthening women's empowerment in rural areas.

Challenges of Women's Participation in Politics

Women's participation in politics is meagre in some regions of Pakistan. Women are often discouraged from participating in political affairs, and so is a representation of women in elections very low. Under the regime of Pervez Musharraf, a new system was introduced in local news, which contributed to increasing the representation of women by up to 33% in local elections. For the first time in the entire history of the Pakistani system, in 2001, a larger number of women were elected. The Pakistani government has taken several practical steps to reduce gender inequality (Moheyuddin, 2005b).

In the first phase of implementation, Pakistan is struggling with mixed results. Women now have the right to go to court, but rich men still dominate the outcome of justice. The preparation of new legislation to safeguard women's economic rights and the opportunities to earn will make certainly be debatable as the issue of women's mobility, and economic self-sufficiency continues to bring very controversially because challenges are deeply rooted in the cultural norms. The economic participation of women in Pakistan remains among the lowest in the world (Weiss, 2012).

Socio-Economic and Cultural Challenges

Traditionally, women are destined to their homes, and men are breadwinners. In this situation, education can play an important role in empowering women and putting them on an equal footing with their men and in increasing women's capability to get a job in the formal sector (Noreen & Khalid, 2012). The differences lie in the geographical location of the country, which in turn is the specific evolution of history and culture. Extremism in society is one of the main factors for producing violent behavior. Furthermore, poverty is the central cause of suffering, which discharges the deprivation of basic needs and also generates frustration in society (Ahmed & Hussain, 2017). Moreover, gender inequality can be eliminated through social action programs for women's empowerment (Shah & Ishaque, 2017).

Another determinant is the economic situation of the family from which the woman comes. Even today, we can divide Pakistani women into three groups: the elite class of women, the middle class of women, and women lower class. Each of these classes is treated differently in Pakistan. Elite class women are entitled to several economic, political, and social rights. Conversely, in rural and tribal areas, women face challenges and challenges in their families. Their economic rights are interpreted and defined by male family members. These women are then treated often contradictory to fundamental human rights.

While economic constraints push away the urgency of getting an education among girls, in Pakistan, there are still numerous villages that do not have primary schools and educational facilities for girls; therefore, numerous families do not permit the girls to gain an education in other cities. Economic depravedness is promoting social injustice and violence in Pakistan. In a male-dominated Pakistani society, low-income families with limited resources prefer boys' education instead of girls' education. It was observed that uneducated women are not conscious of their rights, and consequently, they are more abused and victimized. These practices significantly affect women's rights and obligations in all regions of Pakistan.

Conclusion

The most vulnerable situation in Pakistan is that the women are not aware neither have resources to fight against domestic violence and unjust treatment. She is not aware of the weapon of education that can empower her. Therefore, domestic violence, traditional male-controlled society, and unfair treatment are the powerful policy hindrances against women empowerment in Pakistan. Women's empowerment is the most significant policy problem in the society of Pakistan, especially. Women's leave consciousness has opened different possibilities for empowering women. Another specific feature of shaping the position of women in Pakistan is undoubtedly the realization of the rising financial policies. While this consciousness and awareness have opened new possibilities of empowerment, the most of the women populations, belonging to three social classes is still encountering various types of discrimination in different arena of life. Gender inequality arises from home where parents prefer a son over a daughter. The current government has also tried to transform and improve the situation of women in Pakistan, but many of the problems persist because of old customs and traditions. Correspondingly, there is a need to identify the same economic rights policy for the women of Pakistan. Families should be exhilarated to help daughters for empowerment. Furthermore, Pakistani society should capture the demand for the same support of women in family's income. The efforts of media, political parties, and women organizations to empower Pakistani women cannot be fruitful till the patriarchal mindset of the society can be changed. This policy transformation could arise through equal education and acceptance of the equal status of the female. Generally, socio-economic policies have a vital role in supporting women's empowerment.

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